



NEW LINE CINEMA

EVIL GETS AN UPGRADE



JASONTM THE EXPERIMENT

PAT CADIGAN

BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM THE MOTION
PICTURE JASON X CREATED BY VICTOR MILLER

PROLOG

Like Lucifer cast out of the heavens, Jason Voorhees fell, his arc spanning the full length of the sky all the way down to the surface of the planet. More precisely, it was as if he had actually been pushed. Not by any sort of triumphant archangel wielding a flaming sword in service of a deity, but by a man who sacrificed himself by falling with him, to make certain there was no reprieve or interruption. It was the man who burned more brightly as they plunged toward the face of the world and they were still some miles above it when the last of him was consumed.

Jason Voorhees burned less easily, composed as he was of alloys impervious to all manner of destructive forces. This durability had been reinforced courtesy of the nano machines which had integrated these materials into his original design when they had rebuilt him. Accordingly, he burned more slowly, but brightly enough for the path of his fall to be visible in the night sky to observers on the ground.

Bit by bit, he was broken down and carbonized, until the only thing left was a charred fragment unrecognizable as anything that could once have been human. The bright streak across the sky delivered its tiny black fragment to the surface of a lake, where it rested for a short time in the shallow waters at the edge, near to a glacier-fed stream. Just a tiny fragment of him, attached to a part of his mask.

For a day it lay there, in the shallows and the faint sunlight. Then the weather warmed, the glacier started to melt faster, the stream became a torrent and the fragment and the mask were swept out and out into the lake, to the deepest and darkest center, where it fell again, through the depths into the darkness at the bottom.

Cold. Pressure. Hundreds of feet of water pressing down. But within the core of the fragment, a tiny spark of something remained, something that still burned with a tiny flame, something dark and angry and above all, evil.

The cold and pressure tried to overwhelm the spark of anger and obliterate it, but it was too strong. It continued, in the remaining wreckage of what had once been indestructible, unstoppable, and yet

strangely beautiful. It was a grotesque and terrible sort of beauty, malign, murderous and unmerciful, but beauty nonetheless.

Also remaining in the tiny fragment were a couple of even tinier artifacts. They were the nano mechanisms, called ants by the inhabitants of this world, several of which Jason had killed aboard a spacecraft before taking his long fall from heaven. There had been billions of ants aboard the ship and they had created the original terrible and beautiful body, rebuilding it from organic wreckage, before withdrawing back into the reservoirs that held them after they had done their work. But two of them had remained in the body to perform routine maintenance and make other repairs. Only two, but enough to begin the process of replication, to produce more ants.

Even with a full complement of ants, however, there was very little in that tiny fragment with its spark of anger to work with. The problem was compounded by the environment at the bottom of the deep, dark lake, which lacked so many of the viable elements they needed to use in their rebuilding. Above all, it was cold. They had very little energy to work with and the work was slow.

But the nano-ants were both patient and persistent. They had been programmed for this task and only for this task. Atom by atom, molecule by molecule, and eventually cell by cell, they went on with their work.

That which had been cast down from the heavens and had fallen burning to Earth II was the kind of creature which only existed in myths, legends and children's stories. But the ants didn't know. Knowing wasn't part of their purpose, only rebuilding. They worked steadily and the remaining spark of anger was patient. There was plenty of time. No matter how long it took, he would rise into a world where there was much work to do, so much human flesh to rip and tear apart, to slash into bloody ruins.

Jason Voorhees was coming back. He always did.

PART ONE

ONE

With a gentle touch on the steering wheel, Lynne Bowes maneuvered her Cruiser past the cluster of cable robots and wondered, not for the first time, whether being in control really made that much difference to her. It would have been so easy to flip back to automatic, put her feet up on the dash and watch the scenery go by while she listened to music. In most areas, you didn't have a choice about it. Traffic control meant auto was compulsory. Way out in rural areas like this, however, there were fewer vehicles so you weren't bound by the necessity for constant congestion management and you could actually *drive* if you wanted to. And as the owner of a perfect reproduction of a classic Pre-Evacuation Earth PT Cruiser (meticulously designed and constructed according to the original manufacturer specs), Lynne often wanted to. In fact, it seemed kind of a waste not to.

She took a quick look in the rearview mirror at the cable robots receding behind her in the distance, busily extending traffic control farther out. In another day or so, they would reach the new power station. On her left, she spotted a command hummer parked just off the road with a clear line of sight to the robots. The Department of Transportation seal on the door seemed to be newly painted. She was hoping to get a look at the interior as she went by. Hummers were so ugly, although they were cute, but the windows were at full tint. Lynne pressed her lips together briefly; the human supervisor inside was most likely taking a nap and leaving all the hard work to the bots. No need to bother with any human control.

Control, power, politics. As ever, these were the heart of the matter, Lynne thought. And here she was, a student at CM University, one of the top grad schools in the country, supposedly preparing herself for a career in public policy and management, and dithering as to whether she wanted to be in control of her own car. Curious paradox, or merely ironic? Let history judge, Lynne chuckled to herself.

History, at least the political history of Earth II and what could be determined from the records of Pre-Evacuation Earth gave her one answer: freedom. Of course, the records of Prevac Earth were decidedly fragmented and missing important sections, but the recent archaeological missions back to the dead planet continued to yield new information for the historians. The records that came back might as easily be a recording of a popular singer of the early-twenty-first century as a digital copy of a politics book, but enough was coming back to fill in important gaps in knowledge about the Prevac planet. And no one should be sniffy about recordings of pop songs coming back, since the whole culture of Earth II was constantly enriched by the surviving cultural artifacts from Earth I.

It had been the Founding Parents who had made the decision to take over wholesale the Constitution of the old United States as a model for the new planet. This Constitution had, of course, been created by the old Founding Fathers in a less sexually enlightened and emancipated age, four centuries before its reinterpretation as the practical politics of twenty-first century America and its wealthy allies. This had resulted in headlong increases in the greenhouse gases which had destroyed Prevac Earth. As the warming of the planet had accelerated, the frequency of disasters such as hurricanes, droughts, floods and killer heat waves had gone through the roof. The natural environment had collapsed, unable to support human life or much other life of any kind.

It was only through the cooperation of the remaining populations that a small number of the human race had been able to evacuate and start the "human diaspora." This diaspora had been assisted by encounters with aliens who had provided humans with interstellar drive, a technology which enabled them to look for a new planet to settle, for something more permanent than the space habitats humanity had previously developed, mostly in the old Solar System.

So they had come to Earth II, with a determination to set up a society based on ideals of freedom and human rights. Over the centuries since the new planet had been settled, the human race had begun to grow again. Now the population and level of urbanization had grown enough to warrant the use of non-renewable energy

sources. The decision to base new supplies on nuclear fission plants was a controversial one, nonetheless. There were, for example, all those difficult questions about *control*, which brought Lynne back to the beginning of her train of thought.

It wasn't like she was the only grad student who struggled with the issues of control and freedom. But for some of her fellow students, like Peter, who shared her fascination and affection for old Earth I movies, it was very simple.

"Better us in control than the monsters of the Id," he had said after they'd seen *Forbidden Planet* at a vintage Prevac media festival.

"Better hope we don't turn out to be monsters as well," Lynne had replied.

"I'm fine," he'd said, eyes twinkling. "How are you doing?"

Lynne smiled to herself at the memory. How was she doing? So far, so good and in control of her PT Cruiser at least, if nothing else. And if she were a monster, she wasn't very... well, monstrous, which was good, considering that Earth II was refreshingly short on monsters. But then, the planet had been uninhabited except for a healthy variety of fauna, carnivores, herbivores and omnivores, none of them particularly nightmare-inducing. The Earth I refugees had had to make do with monsters from the myths and legends they had brought with them.

Well, she might have preferred dealing with monsters, real or imagined, than getting stuck interning with some government science project, the way Professor Morse wanted her to. He insisted she have more science credits before he would pass her for the semester. So much for her plans to take off for the mountains and spend the hottest part of the summer skiing the perfect powder on the slopes of Mt Kazimirsch.

Still, she supposed she couldn't complain. She had spent the earlier part of her twenties insecure and uncertain was she brainy enough, attractive enough? Too aloof or too friendly? Too driven or in need of more focus, too girly (whatever that meant), too vain or not concerned enough about her appearance? And how did she measure up against everyone else?

There had even been a time when she was around twenty-four when she'd found herself, after a particularly disastrous series of relationships, wondering if maybe she should wear her shoulder-length blonde hair with bangs, to conceal her high forehead. High foreheads were associated with being brainy, of course, which seemed to intimidate a lot of guys. Then she'd stopped herself and thought: no, I am brainy, and no way do I want to be with some jock who's scared of me being too clever. So, no to bangs, but yes to looking as brainy as she really was.

Now, at twenty-eight, she was finally getting the hang of how to spend more time enjoying her life and less time agonizing about it, although she would have enjoyed it even more if she had had someone to enjoy it with. Not that she had it in mind to settle down at this point in her life. She wasn't looking for Mr Right, more like Mr Right Now.

The problem was, it wasn't getting any easier to meet people. That was the irony of being in the prime of your life, she supposed; you were more busy than before and had less time for recreation. Between her studies and part-timing for the local weekly newspaper, she was lucky to get enough time to dream about having a social life. Or a sex life. And if she did dream about the latter, she usually woke up too soon, which was so unfair. Dreams weren't supposed to be anything like real life.

Well, in a perfect world they wouldn't have been, and in a perfect world she wouldn't have any bills to pay, either. But obviously it wasn't a perfect world and that fact happened to be how she managed to pay her bills.

When we tell 'em something they didn't already know, that's news, her editor was always saying. If they already know it, that ain't news. Since no news is good news, then good news is no news. Bad is news and scary is news. Waxie Anschutz was a throwback who fancied himself a direct descendant of the pioneers of Prevac Earth I journalism and was trying to single-handedly revive what he called "the great and noble ink-stained newsrooms of yore." Exactly how he was going to accomplish that with a once-a-week hard copy broadsheet was something he had never explained to her.

But Waxie, what if the news really is good; she had asked him, indicating the front-page reproductions he'd had framed and put up on the walls. You have to admit that along with everything else, wars did end, the lost were found, and the sick were healed. Sure, happened all the time—on page thirty-four, somewhere behind the society page and the crossword puzzle. Don't gimme a lotta grief, Bowes, just gimme news. And real news always involves something bad or scary, no matter how good it is.

So here she was, on her way to a 10:30 am appointment with Dr Timothy Olsen, head of the new power station, to interview him for a feature that would appear on the day the station finally went live. If she did well enough, Waxie had promised to send her back to cover the formal launch, so she could witness some government fat cat proudly throwing the Big Switch and officially connecting the station to the national power grid. Unofficially, the station was already connected to the grid and had been for about a day but apparently that supply of cheaper, more reliable power wouldn't be real without the ceremony, and the ceremony itself wouldn't be real unless it was in the news.

And that wouldn't be news unless it had some bad or scary element. Lynne smiled to herself as she looked out over the countryside. On her left, sunlight on the river running through the heart of the valley flickered and flashed through tiny spaces in the dense woodland. On her right, the forest became even thicker before stopping abruptly at the edge of the valley floor. The steep, almost vertical side of the valley reached up and up to the plateau level, where the forest resumed and the river wound its way down towards the heart of sprawling Ramsey County.

This was, as Lynne had learned in her undergrad geography classes, a classic area of upland glaciation. The huge lake up ahead, where the new power station was sited, was a result of a combination of a glacial relict, landslips and terminal moraine material dumped by the retreating glaciers all those millennia ago, which had dammed the valley. Amazing how unspoiled it all appeared, she thought; she might never have noticed any of the pylons if she hadn't actually been looking for them.

After a while, the road began curving to the right, heading towards the valley wall, cutting through a section of woods where the tree branches were so thick overhead that they seemed to form a natural tunnel. Then the road emerged into sunlight and climbed up and up, over the natural dam, finally descending on the far side.

When the road reached the decline towards the lake, the forest which grew atop the huge natural dam thinned, and Lynne was back in the bright sunlight with Veronica Lake and the power station directly in front of her. The power station was an uninspiring gray chunk of a structure; Lynne felt a funny little flutter of disappointment or perhaps even *ennui* at the sight of it. But then, what had she expected a power station to look like, a luxury ski resort? In a perfect world, whispered her mind. She sighed.

On the other hand, *ennui* might have been exactly what the designers had been striving for, she thought as her gaze fell on the people gathered near the barbed wire fence several yards to the left of the front gate. If so, it didn't work on everyone. The demonstrators still weren't giving up. Lynne marveled at their tenacity. There were always a few hardcore individuals in every group who wouldn't let go of the fight, but this bunch were still turning out to march in pretty respectable numbers. New banners and placards, too, or at least newly cleaned and repainted:

DON'T KILL OUR HOME—AGAIN!

GAIA IS HERE TOO!

UR KILLING ME—AND U 2!

ND DON'T BLOW OUR 2nd CHANCE!

THERE IS A GOD & HE'S MAD AS HELL!

GO FIND YOUR OWN WORLD TO FUCK UP!

Lynne smiled at the last two. United in the greater cause yet still diverse in spirit and occasionally indecisive. But never less than

sincere. Granted, some of the demonstrators did look a bit mechanical, like they were going through the motions on auto pilot. Only to be expected when you did the same thing day in and day out, Lynne thought, chuckling silently to herself. Even saving the world was bound to become routine. Like her grandfather liked to say, same old, same old.

The military guards stationed at regular intervals along the fence and on the gate looked like this was equally as routine to them, although Lynne knew they weren't actually as blasé as they appeared to be. Certainly the demonstrators knew it, too, as they were obviously being careful to maintain the legally-allowed distance from the fence. The few people who felt ambitious enough to chant were sticking with the more generic kind of slogan: "Green is life, life is green!" "It's not too late to turn back now!" rather than anything aggressive, despite the banners, which Lynne found a bit curious. Maybe they thought grunts couldn't read.

She started to turn right into the parking lot but one of the guards at the gate signaled her to drive right up to the entrance instead. Amazed, Lynne obeyed, and was even more surprised when the woman came out to meet her with a broad, welcoming smile on her face while another one opened the gate. Either they're even more bored than I imagined, she thought, or this is the New Military they keep advertising. She rolled down the driver's side window.

"Lynne Bowes," she said, offering her ID card. "Ramsey County Star. I have an appointment with Dr Olsen."

"Lt Rena Sofira," said the other woman cheerfully. She glanced at Lynne's ID card without taking it. "We were all told to expect you. I used to have one of these," she added, patting the Cruiser affectionately with one gloved hand. "Also in red."

"Really?" Lynne said; it was the only thing she could come up with.

"Still got it, actually. It's just in storage." She beckoned to one of the other guards who stepped into the booth next to the gate and then came out again with an 8 x 10 waterproof envelope. The lieutenant took it from him and passed it to Lynne. "Okay, what you've got in there is some documentation and your visitor's pass,

which you'll see identifies you as being from a government research facility, here on a consultation."

Lynne blinked at her. "It does? Why?"

"Dr Olsen does not want to advertise the fact that anyone from the press has been invited in." She turned to look pointedly at the demonstrators for a moment. "Things have been more or less quiet and he doesn't want to stir anything up. Like, let them know there's a reporter on the premises."

Lynne couldn't help laughing a little. "I'm from a local weekly run by a guy who keeps a functioning typewriter in his office. And I'm just a part-timer working my way through grad school."

"Hey, this is not my call. I'm just giving you the gospel according to Olsen. If you want to keep your date with him, you'll go along with it." She tapped the envelope in Lynne's hands. "Also in there is a radiation check strip; be sure you have it with you at all times. Not likely you'll end up anywhere hotter than normal, but it's the law." She pointed at the open gate. "Head straight on till you see the sign that says 'Management, Main Reception' Pull into the lot, park anywhere and just go on in. Someone'll meet you. And thanks."

"Actually, I'm the one who should thank you, lieutenant," Lynne said, feeling awkward.

"And you're certainly welcome," said Lt Sofira, her broad grin reappearing with even more wattage. "I was thanking you because you won me a nice chunk of pocket money. You see that guy over there just outside the gatehouse?" She pointed at a husky uniformed man who was trying not to look disappointed and failing completely. "He bet me that when you showed up, you were gonna come walking out of that bunch. I said you weren't."

Lynne frowned. "That would have blown Dr Olsen's secrecy plan all to hell," she said. "What would you have done?"

"Well, first I'd have had to give that clown my next pay check," the guard said. "After that, I really can't say but it probably wouldn't have been pretty." She stood back and waved Lynne through.

Lynne obeyed. She glanced up at the rearview mirror almost expecting to see the lieutenant doing a victory dance. But the soldiers simply closed the gate and went back to their previous positions.

At the bottom of Veronica Lake, things were changing. As the water became warmer, the nano mechanisms became more energetic, which enhanced the new low-level radiation now present in their immediate environment. The pace of reconstruction and restoration accelerated, increasing exponentially. The available materials were different but the nanos had been programmed to modify and adapt as necessary and they did, without thought, without hesitation, without stopping.

Lynne was seated in main management reception, sipping a cup of coffee the dark-haired man on the front desk had brought her. The coffee was pretty good, and the delay had given her time to go to the bathroom off the reception area and freshen up. However, Lynne still didn't like waiting around. She might be working for a small weekly newspaper, but she still had some illusions about the rights and powers of the press.

She had been told when she got back from the bathroom that there would be a few minutes' wait before she could go to Dr Olsen's office; so she used the time to scan the material she had been given at the front gate. There was the usual glossy PR stuff, under the heading "New Power Working for the Nation," with sheets of background facts and figures about the power station. Some of it looked like it would only be of interest to engineers. What was that old campus joke about engineers? Oh yes, graffiti found on the engineering faculty wall on the second day of semester: "Yesterday I couldn't spell engineer, and now I am one." That pretty well summed up Lynne's attitude to engineers and engineering.

However, given time to fill and a chance to avoid asking background factual questions in her interview, which would have been a big waste of time and really not what her editor was interested in, Lynne scanned the less technical stuff. She read that designs for the new power station were based on surviving plans from the new

generation of plants introduced in the early twenty-first century on Pre-Evacuation Earth. They were less complex than plants produced over the preceding fifty years, making them safer and more efficient. For example, a major influence on the designers was the Westinghouse AP1000, supposedly one hundred times safer than earlier models. It had, for example, fewer parts, thirty-six percent fewer pumps and eighty-three percent less safety-related valves, and this meant less likelihood of something breaking. Earth II engineers had improved this even further, reducing the number of parts by more than thirty percent. Lynne had never been that good with statistics and her eyes were glazing over. Jeez, she thought. Just what the readers want, a huge infodump. If this stuff is going in any article, I'd better disguise it well, or Waxie will take my head off for boring the readers.

She was still working out ways of doing this when the man from reception ushered her into an elevator that took her down several hundred feet and delivered her to a smiling woman waiting behind the wheel of an electric cart. She motioned Lynne into the passenger seat, introducing herself as Kit, senior PR press officer. So, thought Lynne. That would be Press Kit, then. Ha, ha. To Lynne, Kit didn't look old enough to be a senior anything, although that might have been the combined effect of the pixie-cut black hair and the pastel green two-piece outfit she was wearing. It seemed just a little too big for her, like something she was supposed to grow into.

She certainly drove like a kid, Lynne thought as they sped almost silently through a series of underground tunnels at a rather alarming rate of speed.

"Not much traffic this time of day," the woman said brightly. "So I can really push this baby to the limit. It's good to do that once in a while, you know. Charges the battery; gets it right out of the red and into the black."

And whitens the knuckles, Lynne added silently, taking a firmer grip on the seat with both hands. "Don't worry," the woman added, as if she had caught something of Lynne's thoughts. "We're not going to run into anyone else down here right now. Or even just see them."

Lynne managed a polite laugh; to her relief, however, the woman was telling the truth. They came to an uneventful stop alive and well at another bank of elevators. The ride had been so fast that Lynne had formed only a vague impression of endless gray tunnel walls, cabling, and a host of side tunnels with helpful labels such as BS59, which told her precisely zilch. Except perhaps that this underground complex, far below the visible building of the plant at ground level, was vast. She didn't have the foggiest idea what it was all for, and Kit waved away her questions with a laugh and the non-reply: "Search me, I just drive the main tunnels when I get a chance. Everything else is off limits to anyone except the high security techies." Well, Lynne thought, maybe the tunnels are just there. Maybe no one knows what they are all for.

They got out of the vehicle and Kit escorted Lynne up to Timothy Olsen's office.

"Glad to see you survived the Grand Prix," Olsen said, with a quick glance at the press officer. "I hope it wasn't too much of an ordeal."

Lynne laughed nervously as she shook his hand. As the head of a major power station, he was a most unimposing figure, slender, almost delicate and she felt as if she were towering over him in her high heels. She had traded the comfort of her favorite sneakers for a more formal, professional look in the car before going in. At the moment, she didn't feel so much professional as she did gawky, a feeling not relieved by the rather courtly way that Dr Olsen tucked her hand into the crook of his arm before he turned to the door of his office. Lynne had only a few moments to enjoy this, and to wonder why none of the men she had dated in the last ten years since she came of age had ever taken her arm in such an old-fashioned way.

She thought that Dr Olsen had meant to open the door, but the moment he reached for it, it vanished, along with the entire wall, and she found herself staring at a spacious room that looked more like somebody's luxurious living room than a scientist's office. The entire far wall was transparent from floor to ceiling, giving a perfectly

unobstructed view of the rolling green lawn stretching all the way to the shore of the lake.

Olsen brushed his fingertips across the transparent door in front of him and suddenly she was seeing the room through a smoky tint.

"This is one hell of a nice office you've got here," Lynne said as he finally opened the door and led her inside. "Back at the newspaper, I can't even get one *little* window."

"This isn't really my office," Olsen said, motioning for her to take a seat on the outrageously long, pastel blue sofa facing the view. "We use it more as a conference room." He motioned at the PR officer as he sat down beside her; in the next moment, the woman was wheeling over a cart with a full coffee service on it. Lynne suppressed the urge to make a joke about what a careful driver she had become.

Olsen served her with a display of old-fashioned manners that made her feel boorish as well as gawky. He couldn't have been more than forty-five but he had the air, even the body language, of someone much older. Even the charcoal colored suit suggested—well not age, exactly, but some of the qualities that went with it. Substance; authority; even wisdom. She was starting to find him rather intimidating.

And then all at once, she heard Waxie's voice in her brain, so clearly that he might have been in the room with her. Well, of course you're intimidated. He's a physically small man. Do you think he'd be running a power station if he couldn't present himself as powerful? If he hadn't figured out how to intimidate, he'd have been squashed like a bug long ago. Now get up on your hind legs like a good reporter and intimidate him right back. Smiling inwardly, Lynne set her cup on the low table in front of her and took her recorder out of her shoulder bag.

"So, I'm actually here undercover as a fellow scientist," she said chattily, touching the visitor card hanging on the chain around her neck. "But at *your* request, so as not to stir up the protestors at the gates. As I tried to tell one of your guards, I'm not from World Net or PNN or even Janet Planet's News 2 Use. I'm a grad student working part-time for a weekly hard-copy sheet."

Olsen nodded politely, obviously waiting for her to go on.

"So why agree to an interview with—well, to be brutally honest, a nobody?"

The man's lips stretched in a slow, wary smile. "I might point out that it's yourself you're being brutal to," he said.

"You can color me surprised," put in the PR officer, practically on the heels of his words. Shoving Lynne's coffee to one side, she perched on the table opposite both of them. "The last thing I ever thought I'd ever hear any journalist say was how unimportant they were."

Olsen chuckled and reached for a chocolate cookie. Nibbling at the cookie, saying nothing, he sat back on the couch and sipped his coffee.

"Personally, I blame the PR industry as a whole for this sorry state of affairs," the woman went on briskly. "Or maybe it's society. Stratification, the pecking order, etc, etc. But when Dr Olsen took charge of the power station, he called us all together, all the employees, and he just laid his vision right out for us."

Oh Lord, thought Lynne. Here we go with the Vision Thing. What chance a Thousand Points of Light? She started to say something but the woman talked over her. "This power station is not for the elite—it's for everyone. It's to make life better and easier for everybody, and like all the best tools, it's supposed to do that inconspicuously, just running along in the background without fanfare or a whole lot of fuss. If it does the job right, we're all supposed to forget it's even there. Here, I mean. That's our duty. And that starts with the people of Ramsey County," she added quickly, talking over Lynne again. "We're smack in the middle of where they live, which means that even though we contribute to the national grid, we are first and foremost members of this community. There's no better way to demonstrate our commitment to everyone in Ramsey County, especially to those protestors out there, than to put Ramsey County first whenever we can. In this case, to give first crack at media coverage not to some impersonal global news mill but to our hometown hard copy broadsheet." She punctuated her statement with a sharp, cheerful nod. "And that's the living, breathing truth."

Lynne gaped at her open-mouthed for some unmeasured time before turning to look at Olsen.

"Does that answer your question?" he said.

Lynne hesitated. "I guess I blame PR, too," she said finally.

"Some people just can't handle honesty." The PR officer shrugged and got up. "More coffee?"

"No, thanks." She stood up as well. "But you can direct me to the nearest rest room."

She had expected that Press Kit (Lynne had to consciously avoid actually *saying* the appalling pun) would insist on escorting her. As she locked the stall door and sat down, Lynne wondered just how long the woman was prepared to wait. Lynne had no doubt that the PR officer and Olsen both knew exactly what Lynne was up to, and it was equally likely that every bit of the email she was currently writing to Waxie was being copied to a cache in what was officially labelled their counter-espionage system. But they couldn't block it, or rather, they wouldn't dare block it. Not unless they wanted the feds coming down on them for interfering with the mail.

And all the while, they were all politely pretending that none of them knew what was happening, or that they knew everyone else knew the same thing. This is so ridiculous, Lynne thought suddenly. How much time and effort would have been saved if they had just dispensed with the charade altogether. She was sorely tempted to pop out of the toilet stall and say, Look, we all know I'm sending my editor a copy of what I recorded you saying and telling him I've never heard such a blatant piece of bullshit ever. Let's just skip any more screwing around and I'll just do this interview and leave.

She was on the verge of actually standing up when her phone screen lit up with Waxie's reply. It was short and to the point.

B nice. Do interview. Go home.

Lynne sighed and flushed the toilet. The sound of water running away was the sound of any hopes of having an interesting day

flushing away too. Heigh-ho, she thought. Time to be a good sport.
Now, if only I had brought my sports clothes.

TWO

There was one way, and only one way, to get past the fence onto the power station property. It sucked, and you had to be really fucking careful if you didn't want to get caught. But if you were a good swimmer, were tough enough to go naked in extremely cold water towing a waterproof bag with your clothes, and didn't mind risking your 'nads in whatever the radiation level was, then all you had to do was take a dip in Veronica Lake.

Of course, you couldn't just strip down and wade in. You had to strip down and cover yourself from head to foot with mud and make sure you slipped in and out at a spot screened by as much overgrowth as possible. Although the groundskeepers didn't tend the area of the lakeshore off the grounds, the security guards watched it pretty closely. There was a floating barrier wired with an alarm that marked the boundary of the power plant property, but the motion sensor only went down twenty feet, so it wasn't all that hard to slip under. If you could withstand the cold without having a heart attack, that was.

The power plant management was obviously counting on the cold more than just about anything else to discourage protestors from trespassing; that and the possibility of getting cooked by radiation. The plant trumpeted how low the radiation level was everywhere but everybody in the movement knew that was pure grade Z bullshit. Or friggin' lies, to put it frankly.

Well, nobody *wanted* to get radiated. On the other hand, nobody wanted to let *them* go and kill Earth II the same way they'd killed the old homeworld. But anyone serious about preventing Gaiacide would have be prepared to put everything on the line, especially their 'nads. It sucked, but somebody would have to make the sacrifice for the greater good.

Sawyer Orestes (rhymes with "testes", ha, ha) had been the first to volunteer for a reconnaissance mission. No sabotage, no breaking-and-entering, just a stealthy little look around to get the lay of the land. He planned every step, went over it repeatedly, and then took

the ice-cold plunge. He, like everyone else, had been fully expecting to get caught and he, like everyone else, was shocked when he wasn't.

Since his first foray into enemy territory, he had gone again half a dozen times, and he had started taking one or two other people with him on the last few trips. Sawyer Orestes, environmental activist, covert operations expert. It was sexy, which meant *he* was sexy.

What wasn't sexy was the endless group discussions of how best to exploit this apparent chink in the power station armor. Some people felt it called for some kind of immediate, decisive action, although they differed on what this action should involve. A non-violent takeover and occupation of the plant as a demonstration of how vulnerable the place really was to terrorists? Or several hours of improvised guerrilla theater style antics, to make all those plant geeks and fascist guards look like fools? Or even explosives, just to quit fucking around immediately.

Others insisted they should continue to lay low and gather more intelligence, look for some way to bug the place, and then record them making up lies and talking about how they were going to fool the public. Although an even better way to do that would be to have one of them get a job in the plant, build up a good work record for a few months and then start leaking information like radioactive waste.

A very few people argued that they should all pack it in immediately and go home because the plant was actually allowing them to sneak in, lulling them into a false sense of security just so they could monitor their activities. Then before they could actually do anything constructive, the plant security would spring their trap. The next thing any of them knew, they'd be locked in a sub-sub-basement where the waste was stored, withering away with radiation poisoning while the scientists observed from a lead-lined room, making notes on how long it took for them to die. This particular faction didn't argue very much before packing it in and going home but for some reason, that made no difference; the discussions were as endless as ever even without them.

Sawyer Orestes had been activating, as he put it, for more than a few years and he was used to a certain amount of round-and-round.

Lately, however, he found himself less able to tolerate the usual time-consuming arguments and the rhetoric that went with them. In fact, he was starting to think that the routine bickering accounted substantially for burn-out among the veteran activists. Bad enough that they went on fighting the system and the status quo all the time and getting nowhere; fighting each other and getting nowhere was so much worse. Follow that up with the usual walking around and around in a picket line chanting slogans and pretty soon you would find yourself thinking you might as well be a hamster on a wheel.

Which was more or less what he had been thinking when the shiny red Cruiser had pulled up at the front gate. They had been picketing for a little over an hour, leaving another five hours before the second shift came in to relieve them—assuming the entire second shift made it. Yesterday, two of them had been an hour late while three more had failed to show up at all. It could be pretty tiresome.

This morning's turnout had been decent enough that he had been giving serious consideration as to how he could get out of another long day's march to nowhere. Toothache, maybe; his wisdom teeth actually had started to erupt. Or queasy stomach might be better. Everyone else would probably be more sympathetic if he said he wanted to go get himself checked for radiation sickness.

But then the car had appeared with the pretty young blonde woman behind the wheel and all of a sudden he had felt a lot less bored. Pretty young blonde women in general had that effect on him, but this one in particular woke him up because he recognized her. She worked part-time at the Ramsey County Weekly, one of those quaint hard copy things that published a combination of prechewed headline news and local features. He had seen her going in and out of the building only because his favorite cheap café happened to be right across the street. A couple of times, she had even come into the café to pick up a sandwich or a carton of noodles. "For my editor," as he had overheard her say.

As soon as the car had driven through the gate, he had nudged Estelle and told her to run over and ask the guards who she was just to see what they said. Estelle did so and came back to report that, in a departure from her usual response of "No comment," or "Sorry,

that's classified," Sofira had deigned to inform her that the woman was an intern from some other, unnamed government project in for some kind of meeting.

Sawyer had gleefully enlightened her and everyone else as to the truth, but his glee was short-lived. The ensuing discussion, conducted as they continued to walk the standard picket line ellipse, did not quite descend into bickering but it did make his eyes glaze over. Then inspiration struck; it was time for another covert expedition into enemy territory. With a reporter on the premises, even just a part-timer from a nothing printout like the RC Weekly, they were going to be busy trying to sell her a bill of goods. Maybe too busy to worry about possible trespassers.

Another discussion ensued but Sawyer was already too bored. He was going, he announced, and he was taking one other person along with him. Maybe they'd get close enough to the building to scope out possible points of entry for the future or maybe they'd get even closer than that, like all the way inside. Or maybe they'd find the security so beefed up that they didn't even dare get out of the water. But at least they'd be doing something.

Estelle and Mara had both immediately volunteered to come with him, which had both surprised and delighted him. He was not surprised that at least two of his fellow activists shared his boredom; he was simply delighted that they happened to be the two most attractive women in the group. He had managed to get all three of them mobilized before another discussion could break out.

Estelle had actually made the trip with him before; Mara was the first-timer. *Virgin*, as she put it, with a deliberately provocative smile as she took off her clothes and handed them to him piece by piece. Estelle's smile had been amused and tolerant. Sawyer had decided to play it cool and made a point of keeping his gaze fixed firmly on each woman's face as he stashed their garments in the watertight pack with a thin, self-heating blanket and a few handy tools. As the

strongest and most experienced swimmer, he would be carrying the burden of their clothing.

"Now, you have to promise me three things," he said as he tied the pack around his waist, making sure the weight was in front; it sagged a little but not enough for even a minimal amount of modesty. "Estelle's heard some of this before, but she'll bear with me. Right?" He grinned at her.

"Pun intended," Estelle said to Mara, who nodded knowingly.

"First, for as long as we're in the water, we swim single file as close to each other as possible. Mara, you'll be between me and Estelle, which is the safest place for you, since you've never done this before. Second, you don't get out of the water any other place but where I tell you to, and not before I tell you to. Third, and most important..." he paused, looking as solemn as he could so they would both know this was serious. "This water is really, *really* cold, so please, don't laugh at me."

By the time they neared an area of shore on the power station property, no one felt much like laughing. Mara had suggested earlier that their clothes along with the thin thermal blanket were an unnecessary burden. They should just take the tools. After all, they were sneaking in, which meant they didn't intend to be seen. So why bother about modesty? Sawyer had only chuckled without saying anything. No doubt she could answer that question for herself now. Once her teeth stopped chattering, anyway.

They crawled up out of the water under the cover of a thickly overgrown bush that had no thorns but still managed to scratch the hell out of them. Shuddering violently, Mara made to tear some large leaves off a low-hanging bough to dry herself with but Sawyer motioned for her to stop. He carefully pulled off a couple of the largest ones without shaking the branch or any of the surrounding greenery and gave them to her.

"Use as few as you can, and not all from the same place," he whispered with his lips against her ear. "The groundskeepers and

guards don't come around here very often, so when they do, they shouldn't see anything that would make them decide otherwise."

Mara was still shivering badly so he wasn't sure if she actually nodded, but she did as she was told. They all dressed quickly, before they were completely dry, and then spent a long time squeezed tightly together with the blanket around them until the worst of the chills went away. Sawyer thought the recovery went much better with three of them. Or maybe it wasn't so much a question of how many as it was simply who. Sawyer found that when feeling finally returned to his body, it came on strong and hearty. He didn't actually want to be naked at the moment but if he had been, it wouldn't have been a laughing matter.

"Wait," Estelle said, speaking softly but urgently as Sawyer folded up the blanket. "I saw something kind of funny. I think." She jerked her curly blonde head toward the lake. "While we were under."

Sawyer raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Care to describe it?" Mara asked, still rubbing her arms briskly.

"I'm not sure how." Estelle made a pained, thinking-hard face. "It was deeper down, I'm not sure how far. It was just a shadow, really, but I could almost see different..." she broke off again for a moment, "different *shades*, I guess you'd call it. And it was moving. Rising."

They all turned to look at the surface of the lake but there was nothing to see other than ripples spreading out from where insects or some small airborne seed or pollen had landed.

"Maybe whatever it was changed its mind and went back down," Sawyer said after a bit.

"It looked a little like a person," Estelle said seriously. "You know, how you would see someone who was coming up from somewhere below you."

Mara turned to Sawyer with an alarmed expression on her pinched face. "Oh, God, you don't think one of the others decided to come along at the last minute without saying anything?"

Sawyer shook his head, frowning. "I'd expect one of their fascist guards before one of our people," he said, unsure whether he wanted to be right.

"Oh, God." Mara drew closer to him and Estelle. "You think we might be busted?"

Estelle cleared her throat, still whispering. "Actually, those of us who share that particular characteristic prefer the term 'full-figured.'"

Mara stared up at her in disbelief. "Are you kidding?"

"I'm sorry, I do that when I'm scared." Estelle grimaced apologetically at Mara and then at Sawyer, who was still staring at the water.

"If you really did see a person," he said finally, "they should have come up by now. I think what it really was, was just some detritus we stirred up in passing. Or a mutant radioactive frog."

"Ew." Mara covered her lower abdomen protectively. "I hope this doesn't mean all my children will be two-headed frogs."

"Only the first six or seven," Estelle said. "After that, I'm sure they'll all be regular, one-headed frogs."

"Okay, let's move," Sawyer whispered, herding them away from the lake. "There's a spot where we can get a great view of the power station without anyone seeing us."

The demonstrators would have been more than tremendously dismayed to discover that their worst paranoid dreams were correct, and the security guards at the power station did in fact know of each and every incursion. Their surveillance system was both exceptional and thorough enough to keep them apprised of the movements of most creatures larger than a bird, including certain varieties of insect. However, they owed their comprehensive and well-detailed intelligence on the protestors' movements to a far less means. There was a mole in the group.

When Mara had reported the first of Sawyer Orestes's cautious exploratory intrusions, the chief of security, a rather reserved older gentleman named Cosgrove who was inclined to few words and many tattoos, surprised Dr Olsen by calling him to a secret emergency meeting. He wanted to discuss possible strategies instead of simply

sending out a team to throw a net over the intruder. Cosgrove had retired after spending most of his adult life in one or another of the military's elite units; which ones, no one knew for certain. With the possible exception of Dr Olsen, that was, since he had hired Cosgrove personally, but rumor had it that he didn't know any more about Cosgrove than anyone else did.

Whatever else he may or may not have known about his hand-picked security chief, Timothy Olsen knew enough to trust him completely. The only reason he actually went to the trouble of questioning the man about anything was for the sake of asserting his position as The Boss in a visible fashion. Olsen had a strong suspicion that, given Cosgrove's military background and experience, the overt display of authority was one of those protocols absolutely crucial in maintaining the man's respect and compliance.

Even so, Dr Olsen found himself at a total loss the first time Cosgrove showed him the image of the trespasser on one of the screens in his office and said he wanted to talk about it. Simply bringing the guy in, sticking him in a cell, and interrogating him until he came apart probably would not tell them much. The rest of them would probably postpone any further actions indefinitely and there they'd be, paying Mara a fat salary just to tread water with them for six months, possibly more, and not getting any smarter for it.

Whereas if they let the activists believe they could actually slip one by the Big Bad Power Station, they could watch them even more closely. Put a few more eyes and ears in the area, tune them to an encrypted channel and they would learn things even Mara couldn't.

If they were planning to mount some kind of big sabotage operation, Cosgrove said, then let them. He and his team would be able to watch every step and catch them in the act. Then they wouldn't have to settle for prosecuting one or two of them for mere trespassing. They could have the whole lot put away as terrorists, which was the sort of thing that tended to discourage other would-be activists from getting ideas. Hell, after that it might be years before they saw another picket line. Maybe even decades.

"And if they do something else instead," Olsen had asked him, "what then?"

Cosgrove had almost smiled. How the hell could we possibly know whatever they're doing isn't a serious attempt to sabotage the plant?

Olsen had given him carte blanche to deal with uninvited guests in whatever way he felt was best, with the proviso that no one else at the plant was to know about it outside himself and the security staff. Cosgrove actually had smiled at that, albeit briefly; since his retirement, he had missed covert ops.

This wasn't actually very much in the way of a covert operation, of course, but Cosgrove didn't care; it was the spirit of the thing that mattered and it made the job that much more interesting. Privately, he thought it would probably be some time before the activists got their shit together enough to organize anything even remotely resembling a guerrilla-style raid, at least from what Mara had been telling them. When they weren't picketing, they seemed to spend most of their time arguing; whatever time they had left over after that seemed to be devoted to screwing like jackrabbits.

Or maybe that was just Mara.

At the moment, Mara was crouching behind a tangle of undergrowth with Estelle, waiting for Sawyer to come back for them and regretting her impulse to go along on this expedition more than she had ever regretted anything in her life. No, more than she had ever *imagined* regretting anything; also, she was pretty sure, more than she would ever regret anything else in the future. She had heard them talk about how cold the lake was but she had in no way been prepared for the reality.

What was really wild was that this was Sawyer's *seventh* goddamned time. Sawyer Orestes-rhymes-with-testes-ha-ha; the guy had never been a candidate for the Sane Man of the Year Award but jeez, he had to be crazier than a friggin' sack full of monkey butts to keep doing this over and over.

And what in God's name was going on with Estelle? She had always been low-key, demure even, to such an extent that Mara had been shocked when she had volunteered to go with Sawyer at all.

And now here she was, doing it for the second time Even though she knew what to expect, how cold that friggin' water was going to be. Goddamn, she had to be even crazier than Sawyer. Estelle had to have completely lost her mind and if she had to back into that water one more time, Mara was certain she would lose her own as well.

Since there was absolutely no other way of getting back on the other side of the fence, this was definitely a problem. Staying behind and insisting she could find her own way back was out of the question; Sawyer and Estelle would never allow it. However, if she forced the issue by running away and reappearing safe and sound later on, they were all bound to take her for a mole.

But holy mothering blue hell, the water was so fucking *cold!* The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that she simply could not bring herself to make the return trip. It was not just that the water was murky and actually kind of creepy; she thought she had seen something moving farther down in the depths on the way in, although she had dismissed it as nothing. Nor was she particularly taken by the idea that the lake probably was more radioactive than the power station claimed, and definitely more radioactive than it should have been. But most of all she just could not get past that bone-crunching, flesh-numbing, brain-killing *cold*.

And anyone who could was maybe not simply crazy but fanatical-crazy, kamikaze and die-for-the-cause-crazy. Which meant that at least two members of this group were seriously dangerous and she had just made sure that she was completely alone and unmonitored in the woods with both of them.

Several yards behind where she and Estelle were hiding, something stirred in the lake water near the shore. Mara glanced over her shoulder but could see nothing without standing up. All at once, a twig snapped sharply somewhere much too close to where she was crouched. She looked up to see an enormous figure towering over her with a long metal blade in one hand. In that moment, everything else around her seemed to go black so that she was looking through a long dark tunnel at the length of sharp, shining metal in the figure's hand.

Then the blade began to move, cutting through the very air itself as it descended toward her. Reflexively, she opened her mouth to scream and felt something hard and brutal clamp itself over the lower part of her face, forcing the cry back down her throat so that she choked on it.

THREE

Lynne found herself wondering if she were actually going to get out of the power station alive. She had never heard of anyone dying of boredom in one of these places but that meant nothing. It wasn't like these people weren't highly adept at covering things up. They did it all the time. Hell, they probably even covered up things that didn't need covering up, just for the practice. But you'd never know, because somebody else came along behind them and covered up the cover-up.

Your tax dollars at work. Shifting position on the couch, she had to suppress a smile at the ancient joke while Timothy Olsen whittered on, believing she was nothing less than fascinated by how his education had inspired him to do something or other. Thank God for the high-capacity log, she thought; otherwise, she might have actually had to pay attention. The tiny little device on the coffee table had room for another eight hours of Olsen's auto-hagiography before the batteries quit, outliving her by a good five hours at least, she thought.

Of course, even if she did survive the interview with Olsen, she still had to live through the ride back to reception. Her heart might not be up to that much excitement after such a quiet interlude. She was never going to forgive Waxie Anschutz for this, she thought. Him and his pronouncements on what was news and what wasn't. If good news was no news, what was boring news? She couldn't wait to get back and ask him that one.

And while she was at it, she was also going to ask him what sort of master plan he'd had in mind when he had sent her out here essentially to be present for a public relations puff piece in real time. Yeah, that certainly was hardcore, no-prisoners, old-school investigative journalism just like Mother used to make. Abruptly, she became aware that Dr Olsen was looking at her expectantly and realized that he had just asked her a question.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I got stuck thinking about something you said earlier. A lot of what you've been telling me about the science

and technology involved here is really complicated if you're like me and don't actually understand why you can't just use a hammer and a chisel to split an atom."

Olsen's expression turned slightly bewildered. "Ah. So does that mean you would consider taking a break for a while and joining me for lunch in the garden?"

Lynne could feel her face redden as she laughed nervously. "Actually, I think it means I'd better."

The garden Olsen had been referring to was on the roof. Lynne had never actually set foot in a real roof garden before. Of course, even rural, bucolic Ramsey County had its share of trend setters with patios and decks and flat roofs covered with greenery. But none of them were a patch on this. It looked exactly the way she would have imagined it: a bit ethereal, like someone's idea of what every place in the universe would look like when the human race evolved to a higher level of consciousness and didn't have to do anything except wander around discussing formerly incomprehensible philosophical concepts and smelling flowers. Or maybe even smelling philosophical concepts and discussing incomprehensible flowers. Who knew what kind of synesthesia might be possible. Even plain old LSD did a pretty good job in that department. Not that a straight arrow like Lynne would ever admit to having used a drug. Or inhaling.

Not inhaling drugs aside, she would have gone along with the flower-smelling, Lynne thought, admiring the rows of flowering bushes on either side of her as Olsen led her to a round table in the shade of the largest umbrella she had ever seen. She hoped it was well-anchored; all it would take was a sudden hearty gust of wind and the whole thing would be airborne. Or perhaps there was nothing to worry about because Olsen had worked out an arrangement with the wind as well as Wxie and God only knew who else. The food looked incredibly wonderful; her stomach growled shamelessly as she let Olsen put a chair out for her. Picnic stylings of the incredibly rich and powerful. How the elite dine *al fresco*.

Lynne looked around for the impossibly young senior PR officer but she had disappeared, without either explanation or farewell,

replaced by an older woman wearing an outfit that her friend Jack would have called "machine-shop chic" in the nicest possible way. The sturdy, brown-verging-on-black fabric, the matt-vinyl accents on collar and cuffs and pockets, the skinny belt and the discreet holster of tools fastened to it on her left should have looked foolishly affected, and perhaps on another person it would have. On this woman, however, it looked becomingly natural. Her strongly Oriental face was framed by a loose mass of rippled salt and pepper hair that fell almost to her waist and made Lynne wish she had let hers grow.

"Dr Annunciata S Kai," said Dr Olsen, and Lynne was embarrassed to realize that she had been staring.

"Lynne Bowes," she murmured, offering her hand.

The woman's smile was unexpectedly sunny as she reached over from where she was sitting, "Enchanté," she said, the slightest hint of a laugh in her rich contralto.

"Dr Kai is the head engineer overseeing the management and processing of the waste with the highest risk rating," Olsen said chattily, and realizing that this stunning woman was an engineer, Lynne was forced to reassess her harsh view of the profession. Dr Olsen turned toward a younger, dark-skinned man on her right. "And this is Dr Theo Shabazz, who is a member of our Human Needs team."

"Human Needs?" Lynne said, shaking hands with him. "Any needs in particular, or just whatever comes up?"

Shabazz's smile was no less friendly for being as reserved as his suit and tie. "We look after the employees. This can be an extremely stressful place to work for any number of reasons."

Lynne looked from Shabazz to Olsen and back again. "So anyone having a bad day can just go to your office and unload however they need to? Scream, yell, rant, rave? Hold their breath till they turn blue? Get drunk?"

"Never a dull moment," Shabazz replied, utterly deadpan.

Lynne turned to Olsen again. "Damn, he's good. If I worked here, I'd be a lot more worried about how he does his job than how she

does hers." She nodded at Kai sitting opposite. "No offense," she added with a look that included all three of them.

"None taken." Shabazz's reserved smile was back. "Although there's very little chance that you would be working here any time in the foreseeable future."

"Oh?" Lynne's eyebrows went up.

"Dr Shabazz's team vet every potential employee, without exception. Scientists, bottle-washers, engineers, laundry staff, pipe-fitters, bakery assistants."

"Security guards?" Lynne put in.

"Everyone," Olsen said, nodding gravely.

"Wow. And who vets *them*?" she asked.

"I do." Olsen's expression was unreadable. "With plenty of expert help from the government. Ultimately it's the government I have to answer to for anything and everything that happens here, so I make sure I get as much help from them as possible. If I have to do all the answering, I won't be telling them anything they don't already know."

And who vets the government? thought Lynne. Who watches the watchmen? But she kept her thoughts to herself, and sat back in her chair, shifting a little. "You're right," she said to Shabazz. "There's very little chance that I would ever work here." Pause. "But just out of curiosity, what made you say that?"

The man's face was pointedly expressionless. "We're not hiring. No offense," he added politely. Lynne burst into hearty laughter in spite of herself.

"And on that note," Dr Olsen stood up and reached for the salad bowl in the middle of the table, "let's eat."

"You son of a bitch bastard!" Mara's body jerked convulsively as she fought without success to free herself. "You rat-fuck pond-scum asshole! You failed mutant abortion!" She was screaming at the top of her lungs as she struggled but with Sawyer's big hand clamped

firmly over her mouth, nothing came out but a lot of shrill, heavily muffled noises that bore no resemblance to words.

Mara went on screaming, too hysterical to care about that or about the fact that with Sawyer straddling her arms as well as her torso and Estelle's full weight on her legs, she could barely move no matter how hard she struggled. How long this went on before her energy finally gave out she had no idea but it seemed as if they held her there for hours.

And even after she went limp, that fuck-head Sawyer took his time climbing off her. That son of a bitch. It was just a goddamned good thing for him that she really was too wiped out to do anything other than gasp for breath while she lay there in the dirt and the dead leaves and the twigs and the frigging bugs, and Jesus, who knew what else. Rabbit afterbirth for all she knew. Otherwise, she would have torn Sawyer's stupid motherfucking head off and stuffed it so far up his old dirt road that it popped out of his neck again. And then followed up with that stupid machete.

At least Estelle was smart enough to understand. "If she goes for you after we get out of here, you're on your own," Mara heard her say in an angry whisper. "I only helped you with Mara just now so we wouldn't get caught. But if you'd done that to me instead of her, you'd already be fucking dead."

"I didn't do anything," Sawyer said for what must have been the six thousandth time. "I wasn't screwing around, I wasn't trying to be funny. I didn't sneak up on her. It's not my fault she's so goddamned fucking jumpy."

Mara rolled her head to one side and saw him sitting well out of her reach with his back against a tree while Estelle sat cross-legged beside her.

"You," Sawyer said, using the machete to point at her, "are never going on one of these with me again. Is that clear?"

"Promise?" she whispered.

"It's not funny," he snapped.

"Oh, good," said Estelle. "I'm glad you finally understand that."

"Hey, I'm not kidding around." Sawyer got to his knees and continued to use the machete to point to each of them while he told

them off. "This isn't playtime in the playground. We are doing something very serious here. In case you haven't noticed, we're deliberately breaking the law and if we're caught, we are seriously and deeply screwed. Jail could be the least of our problems. We don't know what those fascists could do to us before they bother to turn us over to the government. Which is why I don't want to be out here with anyone who's going to go bughouse if something happens. I only want people who can ride out the rough parts and wait till later to shit themselves. Anyone here who understands a word I just said, feel free to toss a 'Yes, sir' right back at me. Or 'Eat me,' I don't care."

"Eat me," Mara croaked.

Sawyer let his head drop back and closed his eyes with exasperation. "Great. That's just great. Thanks, Mara."

"Hey, given a choice between 'Yes, sir' and 'Eat me,' I'd say the same thing," Estelle told him. "Who do you think you are with this 'Yes, sir' shit, one of those fascist guards?"

"And I thought you'd know better, Estelle, just because you'd done this before," Sawyer jeered. "That'll teach me to underestimate the power of human stupidity."

"And I thought you were worried about getting caught," Estelle said. "Talking pretty loud there, sir. Should I still bother to keep my voice down?"

"Stop it, both of you," Mara said as she raised herself up on one elbow. She was still somewhat breathless and she still felt like pounding Sawyer's obnoxious face against a tree trunk until there was nothing left but a grease spot but she did her best to look and sound completely calm and reasonable. "I'm sorry I shorted out on you guys like that. Sawyer's right, I could have fucked it all up. And not just for us three but for everyone else, too. The government would be charging the whole group with conspiracy to commit sabotage and God knows what else." She paused, trying to relieve her dry mouth by swallowing a few times. "Anyway, I'm sorry."

Estelle reached over and gave her arm a sympathetic squeeze. Sawyer's expression softened slightly but he didn't look completely convinced.

"Okay, you're sorry. What do you expect me to say to that?" he asked after a moment.

Estelle made an exasperated noise. "Do you have to be such a prick?"

"I don't expect you to say anything," Mara replied, talking over her, "except maybe tell us what we're supposed to do now. Are we gonna do whatever it is we came out here for or are we just going to call it all off and go back?"

Sawyer sat back against the tree and gazed down at the machete resting on his lap while he thought it over.

"I vote for going back," Estelle said suddenly, to both Mara's and Sawyer's surprise.

"You do?" Mara whispered.

"Yeah. I'm not trying to make you feel bad but I'm just really rattled now. I don't think I'm good for anything more today. Not high-pressure stuff like this."

Mara nodded. "The thing is, I'm definitely not ready to go back into that water yet."

"That, too," said Estelle as they both looked at Sawyer. "Just what did you have planned, anyway? You didn't say before we left."

Sawyer shrugged. "Well, besides getting the two of you more familiar with the terrain, I was thinking about having a look at the fence. I think I might be able to work out a way to disarm it temporarily from this side. So we could get back without having to swim."

"Oh, God, please," Mara said. "Please do that. I take back every rotten thing I said. I am so sorry. If you fix it so I don't have to go back in the lake to get out of here, I'll be your slave forever."

"What an offer," Sawyer's face was unbearably smug. "I'll do my best but I can't promise. And even if I figure something out on the spot, I still can't promise I'll be able to do anything today."

"You could try," Estelle said reprovngly.

"I always do. It's just that I might not have the right equipment with me."

Mara and Estelle looked at each other. "Please tell me you brought something besides that oversized toad-sticker," Mara begged.

"This isn't a toad-sticker, it's a perfectly-balanced cutting tool and weapon." Sawyer held the machete up and showed them the handle. "Plus, there are half a dozen separate tools in here, including a mini-laser and a rechargeable energy source." He paused, suddenly looking a bit self-conscious. "I lost the magnifier and I can't do a whole lot of intricate close work till I replace it."

"I've got good close-up vision," Estelle said, brightening. "We could try you talking me through whatever needs to be done."

He shook his head. "I couldn't do that unless I knew exactly what kind of setup we'd be dealing with. Which means I'd have to be able to see it for myself in the first place. No doubt it'll be some of the most advanced shit on the planet. Way beyond stuff like color-coded circuits and just don't cut the red wire." Sawyer got to his feet. "Okay, here's what I think we should do. I'll go look at the fence. Estelle, see how long it'll take you to go fifty yards west from here as fast as you can without making any noise and back again."

"Why fifty yards?" she asked.

Sawyer rolled his eyes. "I don't know, it seemed like a substantial distance. You want to try a hundred, go ahead but it'll probably take too long. I just want to get some feel for how long we need to allow for any shit we want to do in the future."

Estelle looked from him to Mara and back again, mystified.

"Okay, for example," he went on, impatience creeping into his voice, "I already know that depending on the number of people I've got with me, the first leg of the trip in will take anywhere from thirty minutes to almost an hour, counting from when everyone goes into the water to the moment when everyone's recovered enough so I can fold up the blanket and put it away. Timing, Estelle. If the group actually ever stops arguing long enough to plan some kind of action, we have to factor in how much time things take. We'd better know if we have to allow more than four seconds to go fifty yards."

Estelle gave a single, breathy laugh. "Four seconds? What are you, a track star?"

Sawyer rolled his eyes again, this time more dramatically. "No, I thought maybe you were." He turned to Mara. "How are you feeling now?"

"I'm all right." Mara pushed herself to her feet and tried to brush off as much dirt and other detritus as possible. "You want me to go fifty yards south real fast?"

He shook his head. "How's your visual memory?"

"As good as anyone else's, I guess. Why?"

"I want you to map out as much of this immediate area as possible, taking special note of anything that makes a good landmark. Memorize what it looks like and where it is relative to the lake."

Mara wrinkled her nose. "You should have told me. I'd have brought my camera. It's got enough capacity to chart everything in a hundred-mile radius."

"Which means it puts out enough power to show up if the power station security scans for electronic activity. And I assume it's got a locator chip in case it's lost or stolen?"

"There are ways you can block that," Mara said, unsure as to whether she were lying or not.

"You know any?"

She made a noise of disdain. "Don't be ridiculous. If I knew shit like that, I'd be over in the power station making a fortune, not out here with you guys making an ass of myself. No offense," she added quickly. "Sorry, I'm just having a bad day."

Now Sawyer and Estelle were trading looks with each other.

"But hey, I didn't say I wouldn't map," she said, doing her best to look agreeable. "I'll do it. I'll map like mad, I'll get as many details as possible, and after we get back, I'll draw as much as I can. And next time, I'll bring something to sketch with. That shouldn't be any problem. As far as I know, they're still making wax crayons without locator chips."

"Fine," said Sawyer in a flat, unenthusiastic tone. "Okay, check the time." His gaze fell on Mara's bare arms. "Oh, shit. You don't have a watch."

"No, but I have a good sense for time passing," she said.

He opened his mouth to argue with her but Estelle put up a hand. "Let it go for now, will you?"

Sawyer hesitated, then shrugged. "You're right. Okay, look around, see where we are. We meet back here in an hour." He looked at Mara.

"Set your special time-passing sense so you'll be early. Just to be on the safe side."

Mara snapped to attention and saluted him. "Eat me."

"The same to you." He disappeared into the woods.

She felt Estelle's hand squeeze her shoulder gently. "Are you sure you're okay? Maybe you ought to go with me instead. I should probably be timing this for more than one person anyway."

Mara gave Estelle's hand an answering squeeze. "Nah, let's just do it his way this time. It'll be that much less for him to complain about later."

The moment Estelle was out of sight and hearing, Mara sat down in the place where Sawyer had been and leaned back against the tree in an effort to make herself comfortable. She had no intention of marching around in the undergrowth playing 3D cartographer and keeping up the charade without an audience. If either of them came back early, she'd tell them she had eyestrain from doing all that eidetic memorizing. Then later when she made her report to Cosgrove, she could request a series of survey maps. 1:2500 should do it, but if that wasn't good enough for a hand-drawn map, she'd just order up some custom-zooms as needed.

Of course, she'd have to make sure her sketches weren't too accurate. And now that she thought of it, she could add certain landmark-type things, which Cosgrove could have his men plant for use as reference points and markers.

A wave of fatigue swept over her suddenly and she let her head fall back against the tree and closed her eyes. Two more weeks, she decided, taking a deep, weary breath and letting it out slowly. She was going to give this assignment two more weeks and not a moment longer. If something hadn't happened by then, she was taking herself off the case. She couldn't stand any more of these people and their bullshit.

The lake, though, that had been her breaking point. That was *it*. She had been on more than a few operations in the past involving

underwater work, one that had included some unexpected hand-to-hand combat. Her opponent had stabbed her in the thigh and sliced through her breathing tube. It hadn't been exactly a fun swim but she had come out of the water in better shape after that than she had today.

Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if she had had anything to show for her trouble. But the whole ordeal had been for nothing. She had frozen her ass—and probably radiated the hell out of it, too—just so they could mess around in the woods.

The hell with this. Someone else could play double-agent eco-warrior for a while. She needed a break. All at once she became aware of the sound of someone moving through the woods, coming toward her from the direction in which Sawyer had gone earlier. Good God, she thought, was Orestes-rhymes-with-testes back already? Apparently his perfectly-balanced weapon with the half-dozen miracle tools in the handle was no match for the power station's sophisticated defenses. Seized with a sudden stubborn contrariness, she kept her eyes closed, listening to the intermittent soft snap of twigs and the rustle of leaves as he came closer.

"Even without a watch, I'm absolutely positive it hasn't been an hour yet," she said, smiling. He didn't answer as he came to a stop directly in front of her. "Does that mean you got it all figured out already?" she chuckled. "Hope you remembered not to cut the red wire."

He still didn't say anything.

Mara chuckled again. "Don't tell me you're not speaking to me." She waited. "Oh, right, if you really aren't speaking to me, you wouldn't tell me anything. Not even that."

Nothing, not even a long-suffering sigh. Maybe he was going to hold his breath until he turned blue while he was at it.

"You're mad because I'm not walking around imprinting the exact image of every bush and tree on my memory," she said. "Actually, I did as much as I could. Then I felt like my brain was saturated." She paused again. "Okay, since you seem to be done, why don't you give me a hand?"

Something suddenly plopped into her lap, making her jump. Surprise turned immediately to irritation; what the hell did he think he was playing at? She opened her eyes to see what Sawyer had thrown at her.

At first she thought it was a dead albino toad—Sawyer's way of getting back at her for calling his great big penis substitute a toad-sticker. Then she blinked and the blood-spattered object seemed to come into sharper focus. Now she saw that there were too many appendages and the shape was wrong. Then the limbs registered as fingers, only slightly curled and not obscuring the palm. Head line, heart line, life line; without her willing it, her eyes tracked the curve of the life line down to what was left of the wrist. There was just enough to keep the watch in place.

Sawyer's watch. She didn't have one with her so he was loaning her his, she thought, dazed.

Then: No, he's not giving me his watch. He's giving me a hand.

Her gaze moved forward, going from her lap to the lower legs of the person standing in front of her. Weird boots—if they even were boots. Made out of something that looked like rubbery mud shot through with veins of metal, all coated with the slime that seemed to be oozing out from inside the material itself.

If they really were boots, they were all of a piece with the clothing. She could not see any seam or break as her gaze travelled steadily upward. Was that metal framework actually a kind of partial exoskeleton? Was it metal? It didn't look organic in the least but it seemed to be sweating or breathing, or like there was some kind of a pulse in it.

Her stomach began to execute a forward roll in slow motion, but Mara was only distantly aware of her own queasiness. She had no thought, no understanding, only the sight of something too malformed, too surreally grotesque and repellent to be called a face. It was something entirely different, ugliness without mercy, something formed from hate and murder, with a fury that was elemental. It had the inhuman quality of an insect, but it was not insect-like, it was monstrous and malign, a nightmare from some deep, dark place, untouched by the light of day.

Brilliant, shining, savage eyes the color of blood stared back at her from the depths of two dark holes. He's wearing a mask. The thought blew through her mind briefly, no more than a scrap of paper caught in a wind.

There was a bright flash of something and, very much against her will, her gaze shifted to the long metal blade almost directly over her head. Covered with blood, the machete wasn't as shiny as it had been when she had last seen it. In Sawyer's hands. Sawyer's hand.

For the first (and last) time in her life, her sense of duration, of time passing, failed her altogether. Later she might have realized that there had been only a few scant seconds between the moment she had opened her eyes to see Sawyer's amputated hand in her lap to when she had finally noticed the machete.

But that would have been much later, and she wasn't going to live that long.

FOUR

His first stroke took the blade through her diagonally, from the point of her left shoulder all the way to her right hip bone. The soft, juicy stuff inside her burst forth in an uneven, gory bloom that didn't last even as long as a heartbeat; certainly not as long as her heart beat. He brought the machete up and swung it down again, this time from the opposite direction, and felt the sound of it chopping through meat and bone as much as he heard it. Again and again, he raised the machete and slashed downward from different angles.

There was almost nothing to her; just chunks of flesh and bone roughly carved by a blade of cold steel. After the first few strokes, it was like cutting through wet paper. When he was done, there was less than nothing left.

The voice in Cosgrove's communication unit belonged to a very young guy named Estep, who was trying very hard to sound professional rather than shaken.

"Mara's dead." The security chief didn't hesitate, didn't say "what?" or "are you sure?" or anything else; Cosgrove wasn't wired that way and it had saved his life more than once. It took perhaps all of ten seconds for him to get from his desk to Estep's cubicle in the nerve center.

Çihan Estep, meanwhile, was not too shaken to know he should just sit tight for the few moments it would take for his boss to get to him. He used the time to work on his composure. He sat motionless at the semi-circular console with Mara's readouts set for the screen directly in front of him. The two screens on either side had been rotating through different views of the protestors outside as well as the interior of the house that served as their headquarters.

Facing Estep's console was a framework with a further two dozen screens, half of them active and the rest on standby. Cosgrove had put the set-up together himself, a good part of it literally, using his

own tools, after which he personally selected and trained a team of eight, including Estep, to keep track of field operatives like Mara.

The job had turned out to involve a great deal more than trying not to die of boredom as Estep had originally thought. He found himself developing a fascination with human behavior, which became even more intense when he was assigned to Mara.

It wasn't just the fact that she was so riddled with bugs he didn't need a standard visual surveillance camera to see her. It was the image the bugs produced, or rather, how that image was rendered by the console's graphics. Mara had no cams or microphones on or in her; the protestors swept regularly for body spyware. But the vitamins she took wouldn't have raised any flags even if the group had had the right kind of hardware to pick up biochemical activity.

It would have been ideal if she could have transmitted whatever she saw and heard. But as things stood, security always knew her precise location as well as her physical condition; not only whether she was alive or dead but also if she were asleep or awake, hungry or tired, sick or healthy, high or sober. And once Estep had been trained in how to interpret certain things, the readings also told him quite a lot about her psychological and emotional states.

Estep's own emotional state was mixed. To know so much about another person in such intimate detail sometimes made him feel like a bizarre cross between a guardian angel and a stalker. Lately, he kept forgetting that he had never even met Mara. So when her sudden, violent death had shown up on the monitor, the shock had hit him like a physical blow.

Suddenly, Cosgrove walked into the cubicle and Estep felt his own nerves become steadier in response to the man's presence.

"What happened?" the chief asked.

Looking up at Cosgrove, Estep opened his mouth to say, "the readings indicate she was violently dismembered with no warning," but what actually came out was:

"Some psycho fuck just fucking hacked her to fucking ribbons."

Cosgrove didn't bat an eye, possibly because Estep had spoken in such a calm and professional tone.

"We know there's at least one machete; our regular visitor uses it on the undergrowth. You think he made her?"

Estep hesitated. "If he did, there was something else going on besides Mara's cover getting blown. None of these people get violent with each other."

"Right. They destroy property, not people. Drugs or illness, maybe." He seemed about to go on and then suddenly stood up a little straighter, a slight frown on his face. Estep knew he was listening to his comm link; whatever he was hearing, it wasn't good news.

Abruptly, he leaned over the console and retuned one of the other monitors. The display changed from a long shot of the protestors as seen from inside the console to a heavily enhanced close-up from a telephoto zoom. Even with the enhancement, however, it took a second or two before Estep realized he was looking at more than some damaged trees and a few torn up bushes. Stunned, he turned to look at Cosgrove. "Is that...?"

Cosgrove responded by making a few more adjustments. A graphics program woke up and went to work quickly, erasing select portions of undergrowth. Interpolating from known data, it filled in the rest of the face that had been partly obscured behind the leaves and branches. Within a minute, Estep could see not only that it was Sawyer Orestes but also that it was only Sawyer Orestes's head, impaled on the end of a thick branch stuck in the ground like a post.

"Yes," Cosgrove said matter-of-factly. "It is."

Stunned, Estep turned to look at him. "You don't think it was that other girl?"

Cosgrove shook his head solemnly. "No. She'll be next, though, if she isn't dead already. And I know for sure it's not one of us. Obviously, we have a surprise mystery guest who doesn't like our protestor friends, and whoever it is may not like the power station any better." He barely paused as he retuned the rest of Estep's monitors. "I'm closing Mara and filing everything we've got as is. This is your new assignment."

Estep felt a wave of uncertainty sweep through him as he looked around at the new displays. "What am I watching for?"

Cosgrove made a fast noise that might actually have been a laugh. "You'll know when you see it."

Lynne had found the temptation of a second deli-style sandwich too much to resist. She ate slowly, savouring each bite while she told herself that having a third would be an inappropriate and unprofessional display of over-indulgence and absolutely out of the question.

Thus preoccupied, she had eaten about half of it before she noticed the armed guard in the midst of some rose bushes twenty feet away. She might not have noticed him at all, except that he stood up from the bench where he had been sitting partially obscured by a bush of fat pale pink blossoms twice the size of her fist. He hadn't jumped up with any real urgency but it was a quick movement nonetheless and it caught her eye.

Sitting back, she pretended to stretch so she could look around without making a point of it. She counted three others besides the one visible to her over Kai's right shoulder, none looking especially wary, all of them heavily armed. There had to be a few more she couldn't see without being obvious about what she was doing. Had they been there all along? And were there more that no one could see?

Apparently, Olsen wasn't fooling around when it came to the matter of security. Understandable. There was no guarantee that all of the protestors outside the fence were nobly intentioned or virtuous or even just harmless. Or always in plain sight.

The guard near the roses seemed casual enough; he was standing with one foot up on the bench and his weapon resting on his bent knee. But he gazed steadily out at Veronica Lake without looking away even for a second and Lynne could tell from the position of his hand that his finger was actually right on the trigger.

Sitting back in her chair again, Lynne followed his gaze past Dr Olsen, who was talking with Dr Kai about the recent revival of yet another Pre-Evacuation Earth I sport, this one called bass-bowl or basic-ball, she could never remember which. She was familiar with basketball, of course, which had been popular on Earth II for over a century, and the Star office boasted its own mini basketball hoop, with a tennis ball standing in for the real and larger thing. However, she knew next to nothing about the sport they were discussing. It sounded like the sort of thing that should have been far too complex and cerebral to have enjoyed much in the way of general popularity, even during the pre-cable TV era when enormous numbers of people had roamed the streets in a desperate search for aesthetic or cultural gratification.

Perhaps Olsen had told his security force to watch for people who might be roaming the woods in much smaller numbers for a different reason. She found it hard to believe that security hadn't had every inch of land wired to the point where a field mouse couldn't fart without them knowing it. And in case of flatulent fish, the waters of Veronica Lake were no doubt included in the surveillance.

Or maybe it wasn't so hard to believe, she thought suddenly. Not if they didn't want anyone to know they were venting waste from the plant into the lake. That would register immediately on their own security system, leaving a record that would have been just as difficult to conceal, if not more so; the auditors from the Regulatory Commission never slept, never blinked, and never gave warnings.

All at once, she saw Dr Olsen sit up a little straighter and follow her gaze by looking over his shoulder at the lake and the surrounding woods. "Lovely, isn't it?" he said. "We employ full-time staff to keep it that way, too."

"Armed groundskeepers?" Lynne asked, doing her best to sound guileless.

"I'd rather not put my employees in a potentially unsafe situation without some means of defending themselves," Olsen said evenly.

Lynne nodded and turned to Shabazz. "And is that very hard, finding decent landscapers or horticulturists who can also be trusted with loaded weapons?"

Shabazz gave her a half-smile. "Not for the military. You'd be surprised at the number of tree surgeons in uniform." His eyes swivelled to Olsen and instantly the amusement in his face vanished.

"Are you expecting trouble?" Lynne asked, turning back to Olsen. "I mean, specifically, at a specific time, like, say, now, from a specific area. Like, say, the woods."

Olsen gave a small sigh. "It's a sad fact that as far as the human race has come, literally and figuratively, there is still some element of risk to being out in the open like this."

Lynne put on an expression of mock concern. "And in spite of the potential danger, you didn't think to give me a weapon?"

"You don't work for me," Olsen said sharply, then tried to cover with a pleasant laugh that sounded just a little too forced. "I don't think arming our guests is a terribly good way of making them feel at ease."

She forced a pleasant laugh of her own, glancing past him to the woods. "As opposed to armed guards at lunch, yeah, I see what you mean."

Olsen didn't smile. Suddenly she was overwhelmed with the sense that she had just used journalism as a pretense to be inexcusably ungracious, rude, even bullying. Shifting uncomfortably in her chair, she used the edge of a spoon to cut a slice of sweet orange-fleshed melon into smaller pieces just to have something else to do while she contemplated her inadequate breeding.

Shabazz cleared his throat with a polite, almost rueful noise.

"Frankly, I'm forced to agree. If I were the guest here instead of an employee, I would not find the presence of armed guards reassuring, either."

Startled, Lynne looked up. Shabazz was focused on Olsen; his mien was as sedate and composed as ever but the admonition in his expression was unmistakable.

"No, don't apologize," he added to Lynne and she realized belatedly that she had started to say something. Although now that he had stopped her, she couldn't imagine for the life of her what it might have been. "If this were a foreign country, I'd be explaining that we forget how strange our customs can seem to outsiders. But in

fact, the power station has many characteristics in common with a foreign country, many of which are quite difficult if not actually impossible to articulate."

Still gazing at Olsen, he touched his right ear briefly and Lynne got it, feeling a little foolish for not understanding sooner. At least she had remembered to keep the log switched on.

"What am I missing?" she asked, looking around at the three of them. Kai's expression was openly wary now. She turned to Olsen with a silent question in her eyes but he was staring back at Shabazz, his face cold with displeasure.

"It's better to be open about these things," Shabazz said, speaking as if in reply to a statement of Olsen's that only he had been able to hear. "In this type of situation, it's more likely to work in our favor rather than against us."

Lynne winced as her full stomach lurched slightly. "We're in a situation?" she asked.

"Not quite." Shabazz reached over and patted her hand reassuringly. "It so happens that we have some trespassers in the woods near the lake. Not many, but unfortunately at least one of them seems to be more than a little unfriendly, and in a very proactive way."

"Proactive," indeed! That word was one of Lynne's pet hates, a piece of meaningless overkill management speak. There was active, there was reactive. But she knew the battle on proactive and other elements of jargon had been lost on Prevac Earth over five centuries earlier.

God, but they did love bullshit about "human needs" and "caring for the workforce" around here, Lynne thought. It took immense self-control, but she managed not to say, "Huh?" The sarcasm probably would have been wasted on them.

He took a little more time with the third one, even though he could sense she was moving in his direction. All he had to do was wait and she would practically walk right into him. Instead, he circled around

and got behind her. This was the one that had gotten the clearest look at him while he was still on his way up from the bottom of the lake. He didn't know whether she had understood what she was seeing or not and he didn't care. The only thing that mattered was that *he* had understood what he had seen there above him in the dark cold water: three naked human bodies. Three live naked human bodies.

He had watched them reach the surface and though they disappeared from view, he'd had no trouble sensing where they were. When he had finally emerged from the water himself, he had moved quietly and with utmost care to avoid revealing his presence to them. Not because he thought he had anything to fear, he knew he didn't, but because he wanted to observe them. Their behavior might tell him something about his new killing ground. Other than the fact that there were lots of live things for him to wipe out.

As the last live human made her way through the forest, repeatedly glancing at her watch for some reason, he moved out from behind her and positioned himself on a parallel route several yards to her right, drawing even with her. Now he deliberately let her hear a little extra noise as he paced her. Nothing very loud and not all the time, but just enough to make her glance in his direction now and then. She was already uneasy and now he could sense new anxiety waking in her.

The energy in his rebuilt body surged to a higher level, stimulated by the prey behavior she was inadvertently starting to exhibit. He made even more noise so she could be absolutely certain that she wasn't alone, but still didn't let her see him.

She slowed down and then came to a stop near a large rotting log and a pair of thorny bushes that had grown together and were slowly strangling each other.

"Mara?" she called weakly. He crouched, remaining completely motionless.

"Mara?" she said again, a little louder. Then, with more confidence: "Sawyer, if this is you testing me to see how steady my nerves are, you're only proving what an asshole you are."

He put his hand around the slender trunk of something he had once known as a birch tree and shook it.

"What's *that* supposed to mean? You admit it?"

He heard her take a step toward him and then stop.

"Well?"

He found a small stone and tossed it high enough so that she could see where it had come from, but without much force, so that it landed roughly halfway between them.

"If that was for me, you've got a lousy aim."

He held still again and finally she started toward him.

"Sawyer, I don't know what you're doing, or what you *think* you're doing, but you're really getting on my nerves now. Just because we spend a few nights together now and then doesn't mean I'm not going to tell you when you're behaving like a—"

He stood up scant moments before she would have tripped over him.

Immediately, her face contorted as she opened her mouth to scream, but he had already grabbed a fistful of hair at the top of her head with one hand while he swung the machete with the other. The stroke was so powerful and the blade so razor-sharp that it went through her neck without otherwise disturbing her. She didn't scream or fall or even move.

It was a rare moment of genuine surprise for him. He stood still clutching her hair and staring at her face, which wasn't quite as contorted as it had been. Now there seemed to be a faint glimmer of bewilderment in her eyes along with terror.

All at once there was a strangely airy, bubbling rasp as she let out a breath; the sound came not from her lips, however, but from the center point of the very thin red line marking the path the machete had taken through her neck. The line thickened as blood welled up out of it and began to trickle down toward her collarbone. Then a little more air expelled from her windpipe and the rasp became a gurgle. Bubbles appeared in the line of blood on her neckline.

The expression on her face faded slightly, although an observer might have read something like despair in her slackening mouth and heavy-lidded eyes. Jason Voorhees had no words for what he saw,

even in his enhanced state, but was what he wanted to see. He yanked upward on her hair, lifting her head up off the stem of her neck.

Some physical quirk, a dying twitch of muscle perhaps, caused her eyes to look down sharply, as if she were actually still conscious enough to register shock at what he had done. He waited for her headless corpse to topple over or crumple to the ground but muscle spasms had taken control of her death. Her body stayed upright, not swaying even a little, as if it had been planted in front of him like a tree.

Or as if the body were clinging to some residual life left inside of it to remain standing as a way of defying him. Suddenly furious, he swung the machete again, slicing through the waist and severing most of the forearms. The upper torso fell away immediately but the lower body stood for all of a second before it finally fell to the ground.

He looked at the head dangling from his fist. All color had left the face and the gray lips sagged shapelessly. There didn't seem to be any large branches around that he could use as a pike but he didn't go to any real trouble to search. There was no longer any point. She had been the last of the live humans in the forest. The rest of the life he sensed was elsewhere.

His work here was done. He tossed the head over his shoulder and moved on.

FIVE

Olsen announced that they would take their coffee and dessert on the mezzanine at the foot of the indoor waterfall. He assured Lynne that she was going to love it as he ushered her inside. It just happened to be right next door to one of the plant's half-dozen Zen rock gardens, which he was also delighted to show her. And these were only a few of the marvellous on-site features that existed purely for the benefit and pleasure of the employees. All employees, of course, from the highest to the lowest were given equal access, as recommended by those brilliant and insightful folks who made up the Human Needs team.

He kept up the guided tour commentary without a break for the five minutes it took for them to get from the roof garden to the waterfall, although what Lynne heard didn't sound as much like commentary as it did sales patter. The enthusiasm in his voice certainly seemed genuine enough and when she saw the waterfall, she understood why. It was a spectacular creation, about forty feet of carefully carved, slightly glittery stone with enough of a slope so that the water didn't thunder down but trickled and danced along several separate routes into the fish pond at the bottom.

But she could also hear a faint underlying urgency, as if he were literally trying to sell her the power station, or at least this part of it, and he had to talk her into it today if he wanted to keep his job. It was irritating, although Lynne had to admit the ambience produced by the waterfall tempered her disagreeable feelings considerably. Which, of course, must have had a great deal to do with why he had brought her here in the first place; too bad for him that he didn't realize he was trying too hard.

In any case, Lynne wished he would drop the pretense that he had brought her here just to see this and not because the situation they supposedly weren't in had turned into something serious enough to warrant sending armed guards down to the lake. Or perhaps he really believed he had managed to usher her back inside before she had had

a chance to see them moving down the grass with their weapons up and ready.

Tables and chairs had been set up along the wrought-iron fence around the edge of the pool. Olsen kept chattering away, pointing out the gates at either end of the fence. There was actually a kind of staircase built into the rock. If she looked closer, she would see the steps, they began right over there, did she see them? So any lucky employee who felt the urge could actually climb up to the top of the waterfall, which was where one of the Zen gardens was located.

While Olsen was telling her all this, two men dressed like high-class waiters appeared out of nowhere with a coffee service cart, served the four of them in silence, and vanished again without causing him to miss a syllable. Lynne tried to catch Shabazz's eye but he had positioned his chair in such a way that he was facing the waterfall and could not look in her direction easily. Kai followed his example, making Lynne wonder why the two of them didn't just offer the old gotta-get-back-to-work excuse and leave.

Maybe they actually were here for the waterfall, she thought, looking around. Unbidden, it suddenly came to her that there were no windows here. No windows and no sound other than the pleasant white noise of the water and underneath it, a nearly inaudible hum from the ventilation system, or possibly a water pump.

"Soundproof," she said.

Olsen broke off and stared at her, mystified.

"Pardon?"

"I said, soundproof." She looked back at him evenly. "This place is soundproof. And I don't see any windows, either. Is it also airtight, by any chance?"

The man floundered, finally at a loss for something to say.

"I don't suppose I could persuade you to give me an update on that situation we weren't in earlier, could I?" she asked.

Olsen now looked thoughtful and she wasn't sure if he were trying to choose his words or if he were listening to someone giving him instructions by way of his communications link. "Well, to be honest, I'm still waiting for an update from the head of security myself." His smile was a bit sheepish. "I'm the boss, except when it comes to

protecting the power station. Then he is, and he runs everything on a need-to-know basis."

Lynne nodded politely. "Go on."

The man spread his hands. "I'm afraid that's really all I can tell you, other than what we already know; there's an intruder or intruders in the woods and whoever it is seems to be displaying hostile intent."

"How?" Lynne prodded.

"Sorry." Olsen spread his hands again. "Need-to-know."

"And your security chief doesn't think you need to know."

"Fraid not."

"Tell me something, Dr Olsen." She leaned forward over the table and put her hand over his firmly enough to trap it. "If your security chief did think you needed to know, that wouldn't mean you'd think I needed to know. Right?" Olsen blinked, his expression neutral.

"More coffee?"

While Lynne had caught a glimpse of a small armed detail of guards heading toward the wooded area around Veronica Lake, Olsen had succeeded in getting her off the roof before she saw the van. If she had seen it, the level of her anxiety might have gone up substantially. It was actually just a classic paddy-wagon style van, reinforced with the very best and most expensive lightweight, blast-proof armor that nanotech manufacturing could produce, meant to transport personnel and weapons or, in classic, paddy-wagon style, anyone taken into custody.

There had been half a dozen more guards in the back of the van, which took them all the way down to the edge of the woods. The young lieutenant behind the wheel remained in the driver's seat with the engine on standby, one weapon in easy reach of her left hand and another on the seat next to her, pointed at the open passenger-side door.

Rena Sofira had muted her comm link in favor of the dashboard speaker. The multiple voices she heard weren't synchronized with the

images rotating every few seconds on the small flatscreen just below it but she wasn't paying much attention to the screen. She was much more concerned with what she might see coming toward her out of the woods. Cosgrove's order to round up the demonstrators had come through with a close-up of a guy's head on a stick.

Of course, the demonstrators didn't want to go quietly. She had been sorely tempted to show them their friend's new head shot, as it were, but Cosgrove would have had her head on a stick so they were forced to use the standard and more impersonal method of persuasion. Privately, Sofira thought the picture would have made them all move a lot faster and with a lot more cooperation than the stingers had. They were demonstrators, for God's sake, soldiers of conscience. Responding to psychology was how they lived; it was behind everything which they did. Giving them painful though non-lethal electric shocks with a wand would only make them hysterical and even more difficult to handle. She sighed. Cosgrove wasn't a stupid man but he sure had some blind spots. He was also by-the-numbers, straight, ramrod-up-the-ass military, which meant he wouldn't appreciate her volunteering to share her insights. But if she could work it into the body of a report later...

The gabble of voices on the radio was suddenly drowned out by a raw, agonized scream that cut off with a grisly wet gurgling noise. Sofira froze, stared at the radio; then her eyes swivelled to the screen, which was now divided into quadrants, showing four separate locations all bobbing up and down or shaking from the movements of the guys wearing them. The squad leader's voice cut through all the others, demanding a call-in from everyone. Automatically, she started to reach for the radio, paused to wonder if she really needed to add to the cacophony, and then decided she had to let the guys know they still had a ride back.

Not that it took a whole lot of skill to drive the van, which was why she had been surprised when Cosgrove had ordered her off the front gate and into the driver's seat. A bit unusual, considering she had probably had more interaction with the demonstrators than anyone else on the front gate. She had actually expected him to put her in charge of the demonstrators but as he had explained to her, there

was a chance that the murderous trespasser was one of them. If so, she would be more familiar with him, or her, than any of the other guards. That made sense, she supposed, but she still wasn't sure that behind the wheel of the van was really the best place for her to be.

"Oh, SHIT!" a voice blared from the radio, causing all the other voices to die down. Sofira immediately recognized the speaker as Moe Keller, with no little surprise. Moe was another ramrod and not given to lapses in comm protocol. "Lou, I found Dino. He's... he's..."

The four-way split on the dashboard screen was replaced by the transmission from Moe Keller's cam. No, Sofira mouthed silently, unable to look away from the scatter of human body parts on the ground. All at once, the image seemed to give a jump or a flicker and she realized that the pieces had not been scattered randomly but arranged to form a gory arrow, although she didn't know what it was pointing at.

"Keller to Squad Leader, we have a man down in section G-6 on grid," Moe Keller added suddenly in an eerily calm voice, as if she hadn't said anything before. "Strong indications that the intruder is heading north, possibly with intent to exit woods and proceed to power station." Pause. "Over."

"Keller, this is Squad Leader, copy that. Proceed to vehicle and wait for further orders." Pause. "Visual received, cancel general override in your transmission. Over."

"Wilco, as soon as I receive verification of receipt from all intended targets, over." The quiet madness in Keller's voice made Sofira's stomach do a slow forward roll. Somebody go get her, she pleaded silently.

The squad leader didn't miss a beat, replying as if this was nothing more than a drill. "Copy that, Keller. This is your confirmation of general receipt. Permission to end transmission granted." There was a long moment of silence before he spoke again, this time very gently. "Everybody saw it, Moe. You can turn it off now."

A new voice piped up.

"Ybarra to Squad Leader. I am currently at gridpoint G-6 rendering aid to Officer Keller. Also present are Fowler, Flower, and Ferrell."

Fowler, Flower, and Ferrell: sounds like an ecowarrior law firm, Sofira thought as the image from Keller's camera disappeared and the four-way split-screen returned, the display in each window changing every few seconds.

The general chatter on the radio had barely resumed, however, before there was more shouting and yelling from several people at once, this time followed by the roar of weapons-fire. But this time, Sofira didn't need the radio to hear it.

Slinging the weapon on her left crosswise over her shoulder, she grabbed the other and dived through the passenger-side door practically all in one uninterrupted motion, landing on the ground in prone firing position. Twenty feet ahead of her, the surface of a small, lagoon-like section of Veronica Lake seemed to be shuddering in sympathy with the weapons-fire and the screams coming from somewhere beyond a cluster of slender, prickly birch trees and poisonberry bushes.

Abruptly a volley of kill-shot tore through the leaves and branches. Reflexively, Sofira ducked, watching as the line of fire moved from right to left through the trees, slanting upward until the shooter was firing into the air. She started to raise her head and flattened again when she heard more firing. No kill-shot came through the trees in her direction this time but her relief was quickly replaced by worry at the sudden new smell in the air.

The trees that the kill-shot had torn through were now on fire.

"Sofira to Squad Leader," she yelled. "We're on fire here. Repeat: we are on fire!"

"I know that, Sofira. Shut up and hold your position!" the squad leader snapped. "Cease fire, cease fire! Who the fuck is using incendiary load?!"

Someone burst out from behind the trees but Sofira could not tell who it was; every inch of the struggling, flailing figure was covered with flames.

"The lake, straight ahead of you!" she screamed.

The burning figure gave no sign of having heard her but whoever it was began stumbling toward the water. Just as Sofira got to her feet intending to get over there and help, the figure fell face-first into the

lake. She slung her weapon over her right shoulder and called out that she was coming to get him but before she could take a step, a new figure suddenly stepped out of the flames and she stopped dead in her tracks.

This figure was not on fire, didn't seem to be even slightly singed, and from the way he was walking, Sofira got the impression he wasn't even particularly warm. Fire-proof suit, she thought, then dismissed that idea immediately. What he was wearing didn't bear even a passing resemblance to the anti-inferno gear they had; in fact, she had never seen anything like this guy's outfit. The way he was moving, it looked like it was painted on, or like it had grown there right over his skin, or instead of his skin...

He stopped in front of the poisonberry bushes, which were really starting to burn now. That had to be one more-than-outstanding suit, Sofira thought; otherwise, his ass would already have passed the delicate golden brown stage and would be well on its way to char-grilled.

Then her gaze found his face and it seemed to snap into focus for her almost as if she were seeing it through the lens of a body-cam. But only for a moment. Suddenly, she was wracked with a violent coughing fit and tears were blinding her as they poured out of her eyes and down her face. In spite of that, she had somehow managed to shrug the weapon off her right shoulder and into her hands without even thinking about it.

"You! Step forward five paces toward the water's edge and stop!" she bellowed, red-dotting the center of his torso. "Now! Or I'll shoot!"

The bizarre metal gargoyle face looked down at the laser-sight and then back up at her. No language problem, apparently. Now she had to find out just how bughouse the son of a bitch really was. There was no doubt in her mind that this was the homicidal maniac they were chasing; she would have been certain of it even if he hadn't been carrying a blood-drenched machete as long as her arm. She hefted her weapon emphatically, as if she were getting ready to fire.

He moved toward the lake as she had told him but instead of stopping at five paces, he went all the way to the edge of the lake and

stood over the corpse of the soldier still lying facedown in the shallow water.

"That's far enough!" Sofira bellowed at him. "Don't move, don't even twitch!"

The steel gargoyle face tilted to one side with a bizarre suggestion of mild curiosity; then the figure put one foot on the corpse in a bracing position, bent down, and tore one of its legs off.

Without hesitating, Sofira opened fire, giving him a five second burst, and then stopped to wipe her eyes.

The smoke was getting worse but she was able to clear her eyes well enough to see him standing there holding that machete in one hand and the charred leg in the other, still staring at her with his head tilted to one side as if nothing had happened.

Then she heard a sound like a giant fist slamming into the earth. Sofira felt herself lifted off her feet and flung backwards. The last thing she saw were burgeoning storm clouds of fire surging toward her as if they were chasing her on purpose, swallowing up everything as they went, even setting the air itself aflame.

"Okay, where are you, Bowes? You can't still be out at the power station." Lynne smiled at the sound of Waxie's irritated growl.

"As a matter of fact, boss, that's exactly where I am," she said. "And as you can probably tell, I've got you on speaker phone. I'm sitting here with Dr Olsen and two of his employees, pretending to admire the fancy indoor waterfall."

Waxie didn't answer right away. "Does the quaint old term 'nonplussed' mean anything to you?" he said finally.

"Indeed," said Olsen. "And you're not alone."

"Dr Olsen, I presume?" said Waxie.

"I apologize for the voice-only connection, Mr Anschutz. It makes it difficult, if not impossible, to introduce Dr Kai and Dr Shabazz, who are also present."

"Charmed, I'm sure. Picture me bowing. The audio's coming through very well and I'm pretty sure that's the famous indoor

waterfall I can hear in the background." Waxie chuckled slightly. "Is it as pretty as it sounds?"

Olsen's mouth twitched with annoyance. "I'd like to think so. Ms Bowes attempted to contact you covertly but when we blocked her, she insisted on doing so openly."

Waxie hesitated again. "You don't say."

"Yeah, they actually refused to let me go to the toilet," Lynne told him.

"Untrue," Shabazz blurted defensively. "Ms Bowes can go to the lavatory any time she needs to. She just can't take her phone with her."

"Which is why I'm calling instead of texting." Lynne chuckled with no real humor. "I wanted to let you know that I'm going to be a little late getting back."

"How late?"

Lynne glanced at Olsen. "I'm not sure. Just guessing, though, I'd say don't wait up."

She all but heard her editor's ears prick up. "Oh? Something wrong out there?"

"We have some unwanted visitors on the premises whose intentions seem..." Olsen cut off. Lynne wasn't sure whether the look that appeared so fleetingly on his face was disbelief or terror; it lasted only a fraction of a second before he composed himself. It was hardly a hysterical outburst but Lynne found the sight of even just that momentary loss of control unnerving; the beginnings of fear fluttered faintly behind her breastbone.

"Hello?" said Waxie. "Anyone there?"

"Hang on, boss. I think something big just happened," Lynne replied, more to see what kind of reaction this would provoke from Olsen than as a point of information, but the man seemed not to have heard her. Alarmed, she turned first to Shabazz and then to Kai, who were both failing to look neutral and in fact looked rather uneasy. "Something big *did* just happen." Pause. "Didn't it?"

Shabazz kept his gaze fixed on Olsen, who was still sitting motionless and silent, staring over Kai's left shoulder at something no one else could see.

"Dr Olsen?" Lynne prodded, almost whispering.

He pushed back from the table and stood up sharply. "I'm afraid that circumstances demand we adjourn to a shielded area of the station. Unfortunately, that means you'll have to terminate your discussion with your editor until further notice." Before Lynne could react, he picked up her phone, turned it off, and put it in his pocket.

"Hey..." Lynne got up and started after him. She had barely gone five steps when a security guard materialized on either side of her and took hold of her arms. There was nothing rough about the contact, they didn't manhandle her or treat her like a prisoner but she knew better than to test them and see if they would.

"... first degree burn..." An extraordinarily cool and pleasant mist puffed into Rena Sofira's face. Barely conscious, she smiled at the way it felt, then stopped as a stinging sensation suddenly spread over her cheeks. But the stinging went away even as she became aware of it, overruled by the burn medication sinking into her skin.

"...hear me, Sofira? Wake up. Let me see your eyes."

She frowned; the stinging flared up on her forehead now. It began to fade almost immediately but this time it didn't go away completely. The cool mist touched her skin there, too, and it felt as if there were billions of cold, tiny bubbles bursting all over the area between her hairline and her eyebrows. No, beyond her hairline and within her eyebrows.

"Lieutenant Sofira, *look* at me. That's an order!"

Her eyes flew open and she found herself staring up at Cosgrove himself.

"Sir?" she asked, bewildered.

"Congratulations, lieutenant," he said grimly. "You're the only one to come out of the woods alive."

Sofira struggled to a sitting position and found she was sitting on the grass about twenty yards away from the inferno that had once been the forest surrounding Veronica Lake. "H—how..." the word

dissolved in a spasm of coughing before she could choke out a question. "How'd you get me out of that?"

"I didn't," he said, turning her head toward him and shining a light first in her right eye and then her left. "You came staggering out of the trees right after the explosion. Open your mouth."

"Huh?" she said.

Immediately, he stuck an inhaler between her lips. "Deep breath."

She obeyed, grimacing at the terrible pain in her chest and windpipe.

"Breathe out through your nose," he ordered, "and one more deep breath in. I know it hurts. Suck it up."

The pain in her chest began to ease considerably as her throat loosened.

"You were on fire," Cosgrove said matter-of-factly. He dropped the inhaler into an open medi-kit. "Your hair, your uniform. I'm afraid you lost your eyebrows," he added as she put one hand up to her head in shock. "You dropped and rolled to put out the flames. Then you managed to crawl a few feet before you dropped again. You didn't move—I thought you were dead."

"I don't remember any of that." Sofira swallowed painfully. "What happened to the van?" she croaked. "Fire?"

Cosgrove looked mildly troubled. "No. Somebody got in and took off around the other side of the power station."

"Then I'm not the only survivor..."

"Yes, you are." Cosgrove shut the medi-kit and helped her slowly to her feet. "The bios of everyone we sent out are gone."

"Then who drove the can?" she asked incredulously, leaning on him.

He shook his head. "No idea. He had something over his face. A mask. Can you walk?"

"A mask..." The image of the impossible figure she had seen just before the explosion appeared in her mind. "No," she rasped. "No. I was looking right at him when the blast... No. There must have been two of them. Or more, terrorists..."

"Save it till we're back inside." Cosgrove slung her arm over his shoulders and began to help her up the lawn toward the power

station.

SIX

A lot of the hair on her head had been burned off as well as her eyebrows, and the front of her uniform was scorched in some places, charred in others, and generally covered with soot, which also obscured her nameplate. Here and there on her face were bright red blotches where spray-on topical burn medication had either not yet taken effect or missed altogether and she had a wild look in her eyes that wasn't as intense now as it was going to be later. All told, she should have been unrecognizable, but Lynne knew right away she was looking at Lt Sofira.

Whatever Sofira had just lived through certainly hadn't impaired her faculties. "What the fuck is she doing here with *them*?" Sofira hollered in a gravelly rasp that sounded painful to Lynne. The lieutenant turned from the group of demonstrators in the holding cell to the guard who had been sitting next to Lynne on the sofa and was now standing at attention, looking as if she was really expecting someone to answer.

None of the demonstrators said a word. The heavy wire some of them had laced their fingers through made the cell look like an animal cage, especially since there was nothing to sit on inside but the floor. The sofa Lynne had been allowed to share with one of the three security guards in the room was so spartan as to be little more than a thinly padded bench, not up to the standard of luxury Olsen had been treating her to but not unacceptable. Shabazz and his Human Needs gang had probably determined that luxury was completely inappropriate for areas like radioactive shelters and bunkers. And secret lock-ups.

Not that she was locked up. She was sitting on the sofa like a guest, not standing inside a cage, which meant that she was in no way a prisoner here, absolutely not. Her shoulder bag and her log had been confiscated but that was only standard procedure in an emergency, and Dr Olsen had merely forgotten to give her phone back. She could remind him later and he'd just hand it over. It wouldn't work in a shielded zone anyway.

And the shielding was for protection, of course, not to keep anyone incommunicado. This was not a lock-up; it just had a holding cell in it, and if you thought about it, the cell was really for everyone's protection too, including the people in it. Yes-indeedy-do, it was all safe and everybody was safe and damn it sure was great to be alive in an era that was so safe, wasn't it?

When Sofira had come striding in, scorched and breathless and very much the worse for wear, Lynne had felt so insanely glad that someone had finally dispensed with the whole ultra-civilized, everything's-under-control charade that she could have jumped up and kissed her.

"For that matter, why the fuck are they still here?" Sofira looked over her shoulder at the two guards by the door, then turned back to the other guard. "Evacuate all these people immediately. Get them out of the building now. That's an order!"

The guard didn't move. "Yes, ma'am, but what about her?"

Sofira peered around him to look at Lynne. "I said all these people, mister. Now do it!"

The guard made a move toward the holding cell and then hesitated. "Ma'am, the chief's orders..."

"I'm giving you the chief's *new* orders. Unlock that cell."

"Does the chief want these people kept in custody after evacuation, ma'am?" asked one of the guards at the door.

"All right, listen up, everybody, because this is the last time I'm going to tell you!" Sofira bellowed. That ragged rasp of a voice wasn't going to last much longer; she sounded like someone had sandblasted her throat, Lynne thought, unconsciously putting a hand up to her own neck. "Get every civilian in this room out of the building, off the premises, and as far away from here as possible. You three, you take 'em out to the parking lot and load 'em into the first transport you see. You two get back here on the double, while you," she pointed at the guard, "and only you, get behind the wheel and drive without stopping until further notice."

The guard started to say something else and Sofira actually drew her sidearm. "You have your orders!"

All three guards scrambled to obey without further discussion. Lynne stood up and cleared her throat.

"Lieutenant Sofira..."

Sofira whirled on her with her sidearm. "I am trying to save your life but I swear to God I will shoot anyone who doesn't do what I tell them."

The lieutenant's fingers shifted slightly. Lynne looked down at herself and saw that a small red dot had suddenly appeared in the center of her chest.

"I'm packing incendiary load in this thing thanks to some skin-bag down in Weapons who decided we'd all be safer if we set fire to everything we shot at," Sofira added. "So it won't be pretty or survivable. You copy that, citizen?"

Lynne had no voice to answer. Sofira's threatening croak seemed to be coming from a long distance away, somewhere on the other side of the panic that had frozen over her. Then all at once the lieutenant was practically nose-to-nose with her; Lynne could see the residue of burn medication on her skin and smell her scorched uniform and burned hair.

"Come on, you. Snap out of it." Sofira grabbed her upper arm and gave it a quick, emphatic shake before pulling her close enough to put her lips to Lynne's ear. "Get up on your hind legs or you will die," she added, speaking with far less iron in her tone now. She dug around in her trouser pocket suddenly and produced a tiny red tablet. "That's just how things are now. Eat this, it'll help. Don't argue with me, I'm not making the rules."

Lynne did as she was told. Sofira turned away from her and went over to where the demonstrators were huddling together near the door. "How many we got here? Seven, eight?" She counted them using the barrel of her sidearm, ignoring the way each one flinched. "Eight. I could have sworn there were more of you."

One of the demonstrators started to say something and cut off when Sofira waved her weapon at him sharply. "Yeah, I know, there were more of you. I meant even more than that." She beckoned to Lynne without looking at her. "Okay, listen up. You stay together, follow these guys out to the parking lot, and then you hit the road.

No stops. You gotta pee or anything, you'll find receptacles under the seats. If you want to eat, tough shit. I just put you on a diet. You get tired, go to sleep. And trust me on this, the military will be watching after you leave here. That means if you fuck with the driver in any way, or if you fuck up the driver, you'll find yourself in a military prison on terrorist charges and good luck getting a trial." She yanked open the door. "Now get the fuck outta here."

They never got near the parking lot. They never even got out of the building.

When Estep saw the van suddenly pull around in a wide half-circle and drive off while Sofira lay unconscious several feet away, he double-checked to see if the sensor readings had somehow been faulty and someone else from the security team besides the lieutenant was still alive. He knew better but he did it anyway, unable to shake the superstitious dread that if he didn't double-check, he would find out that one of the other guys actually had survived the conflagration after all, only to suffer an even ghastlier and more pointless death.

Oh, man, what a lousy fucking day. They were barely into this emergency and already the woods were burning down, a dozen guys were dead, and they still didn't know who was kicking their asses. Had to be whoever had commandeered the van; they'd managed to climb in without showing themselves. And shit, now that he thought of it, how many of them were there, and how the fuck had *they* gotten out of the woods alive?

Whoever they were, they had to be pros. They couldn't have been in that group of oversexed nature-loving rope-smokers with Mara. She would have made them right off, and vice versa, which wouldn't have turned out too good. Not that anything had turned out too good anyway.

But at least Sofira made it, he thought, watching on one of the monitors as Cosgrove brought her in. Didn't make it any less of a fucking lousy day, though, and it was only going to get... Every alarm

in the building went off at once. Estep blinked; the screens on his console were now showing areas inside the power station.

"Enemy in the house," said a voice in his comm tensely. "Repeat: enemy in the house."

"Copy that," came the reply from Cosgrove. "All personnel to meeting points. Shoot to kill." Training took over immediately; Estep's sidearm was live in his hand before he was even aware of the excitement surging in his chest and kicking his heart into double-time.

"How many are there?" he asked, addressing no one in particular and the world in general. Several other voices echoed Estep's question but no answer came, not then and not ever.

As soon as he had seen the truck, the nano mechanisms had sprung to a higher level of activity inside him, guiding his hands and feet so that he could control it. If the nanos had not been inside him, he would have simply walked past the thing, but they had told him what to do, made his body know the movements. Once he got it going, he understood he could take it around to the other side of the building, where there were entrances which would have been more difficult to get through if he had been subject to the same limitations as the living.

The nanos had made him understand that he needed to get inside, and not only because there were live things in there to kill. The energy that had been present in the water, that had awakened the nano mechanisms, stimulated them to reproduce themselves and so rebuild him, that energy was also inside the building in a concentration thousands, even millions of times stronger than what was in the dark depths of the lake.

The nanos wanted it, wanted as much as they could get, wanted it all. For themselves and for him. Using it, they would be able to modify him further so that he could accommodate the energy within himself, thus carrying his own, virtually inexhaustible power source. Then there would always be something for the nanos to draw on.

Combined with his own regenerative abilities, it would mean that he would remain completely uninjured, unimpaired and undiminished no matter what happened. Nothing, not even a long fall from the pinnacle of heaven all the way through the atmosphere and into the mud could ever hurt him in any way, ever again.

The door was several inches thick, with a core of material designed to absorb and dissipate the force from an impact. There was a limit as to how much force it could handle, however, and in his present form, Jason Voorhees was capable of delivering all that and more. But as he drew back his arm, the nanos in his system surged with more new information; all at once, he was watching as, instead of punching through the barrier, he touched his fingertips to it lightly, as if he were testing the surface to see if it were actually solid.

Then he was watching as his fingers sank into the door up to the second knuckle. His head tilted to one side with an amazement that an observer would have found bizarrely childlike in some ways; perhaps it was. Factor in the atavistic, innocent heartlessness that even the most well-adjusted children can (and do) regress to from time to time, and Jason Voorhees was, at that moment, the essence of the term childlike.

Meanwhile, the nanos were showing him how they could rearrange matter to accommodate him in any way he liked. In this case, they could allow him to pass through this barrier in such a manner so as not to alert any of the live creatures inside. Eventually, he would be discovered and someone would raise the alarm, but entering the building in secret would delay that.

It would not be accurate to say that Jason was considering this as he watched his hand sink further into the door. He still had little in the way of higher brain function and the nanos would never enhance that part of him. Instinct was closer to it, but not instinct that was in any way related to life. He was anti-life: murder and destruction now.

Instinct told him that although oozing through a barrier like this might turn out to be useful, it was not murder and destruction. He yanked his hand back and kicked down the door.

Instantly, sirens were screaming every audible off-key note, as well as others which he knew were inaudible to live humans. But the noise washed over him with little effect. It did not matter whether humans were screaming or if their machines were screaming for them, or as sometimes happened, both. Screaming was inevitably followed by life ending.

At the moment, however, he was dominated by the pull of highly agitated nanos toward the power source and the sense of highly agitated life forms rushing at him from several directions at once.

He more or less walked over the first group of live humans he encountered. Some fell under him immediately, their bodies crunching and squishing with every step he took. The rest fell back and some of them ended up under his feet anyway, while others ran.

As always, their weapons were no good against him; as always, they fired on him anyway, as though they were convinced that if they persevered, something would change.

In fact, something had changed, but not what they had wanted or expected. Jason's body was now absorbing a certain percentage of the incendiary shot that one of the less-than-savvy armory grunts had loaded so many of the weapons with. It deflected only what it didn't need, and the nanos made use of the extra energy and materials. The process was not perceptible to the naked eye and even if it had been, it probably would have taken a very long time for anyone to notice under the circumstances. Jason himself didn't know exactly what was happening. All he knew was that the more they fired at him, the stronger he became.

He waded into them, marched over them, swung his machete from side to side and swept the pieces out of his way. The humans started to look smaller to him after a while, as if he were actually growing as he made his way through the corridors to open areas, down stairways

and across terraces and mezzanines, mowing down the ones in front of him, shrugging off those who flung themselves at him from behind or sprang out of hiding to lunge at him.

The closer he got to the energy source, the more agitated the nanos inside him became and, paradoxically, the less attention he paid to them. He moved in the desired direction, quickly and without delay, crashing through walls if he had to, not caring to wait for the nanos to do it their way. Live things kept coming to him and at him. They fed energy into him and he crushed them, sliced them, pounded them down and wiped them out.

Many of them were now choking and gagging from the high concentration of incendiary chemicals that had built up as well as the fumes from the fires they had caused and the stink left behind after the system of emergency nanos put them out. Combined with the smell of their own fear and the ominously heavy and horrific odor that was characteristic of massive quantities of blood, there might have been nothing to breathe but panic and death.

If it hadn't been for the ventilation system, they might have made it. Lynne had no idea whether damage had knocked it out or whether the entire complex had been sealed off as part of some kind of emergency measure. Not that it would have made a bit of difference one way or the other to the first ones to be affected.

She had been slow to notice the smell in the air herself, partly because she was preoccupied with wondering what Sofira had made her swallow and partly because the odor wasn't all that dissimilar to things she had smelled before in a university science lab. Even after it started to become unpleasantly strong, she hadn't thought much about it; the incessant, deafening alarms bothered her a lot more. Also the way the security guards had started getting so rough with them, shoving anyone who didn't move quickly enough, threatening to use the stingers.

She had actually tried to intervene when they had become a lot more vigorous than necessary with one of the younger people. Just a

kid, really. Lynne would have sworn he wasn't old enough to be out of secondary school yet. It wasn't that he seemed frail but Jesus, the guards had just forced them to run up six or seven flights of stairs, maybe more. Lynne had lost count after five. Easy enough for them, they were all conditioned, they stayed hard by training for six hours before breakfast every day, and they were probably buzz-bombed on a hefty dose of something they weren't supposed to take except in combat. Whereas civilians had lives.

She hadn't put it that rudely when she had moved to pull the bellowing guard away from the boy who was down on his hands and knees, whooping and sobbing as he struggled for breath. Or rather, she hadn't intended to put it that rudely, but even if she had, she never got the chance.

The moment she had touched the guard's arm, he had rounded on her with frightening swiftness and raised his arm to deliver a backhand blow with the stinger. Putting up one hand in defense, Lynne cried out as she stepped back, stumbled over her own feet and fell heavily on her side.

The guard slammed the stinger down on the floor close enough to send sparks flying into her face. Lynne scrambled up as he began to holler at her and dragged the boy to his feet as quickly as she could. Which wasn't really very quickly; the kid hadn't been trying to resist, he just couldn't catch his breath.

She tried to tell the guards they needed to stop to catch their breath but none of them wanted to hear her. As they forced the group of civilians out of the stairwell and into some kind of open area, the boy collapsed altogether, his body jerking and heaving convulsively.

Lynne turned to ask the rest of the group if anyone had asthma medication and saw for the first time that all of them were having some degree of trouble breathing. It took another second before she finally realized that the wheezing sound she had been trying to tune out for quite some time was in fact coming from her.

The smell in the air hit her full on, with as much force as a physical blow to her face. Suddenly her eyes were stinging and watering copiously, and the tears pouring down her face seemed to irritate her skin.

"Masks." She looked pleadingly at each of the guards. No problems for them, they had surgically implanted filters. "We need masks."

"There's no time," insisted one of them. "Get going, you'll be out of here before it gets bad enough to..."

She knelt down next to the boy who was twitching on the carpet; his movements were becoming weaker. "He needs..."

One of the guards shoved her away from him, then stooped to haul him up with one hand and throw him over his shoulder, almost in one smooth motion.

"Happy now? Move!"

She started to obey and stopped just before she would have walked right into the back of one of the other demonstrators. He was standing motionless, like everyone else, including the other two guards. Lynne turned back to the one carrying the boy but he was completely still, looking fixedly at something straight ahead. She turned back again, following his gaze.

At first, she thought the figure standing between them and a now open elevator was simply a higher-ranking guard dressed in some special high-tech gear developed by the military specifically for power station emergencies. A second later, she shoved the idea out of her mind. Even if she hadn't noticed the blood and other matter on the long, cruel blade—or seen the way his free hand had been clenching and unclenching with a drive that she somehow recognized as a grotesque combination of hunger and lust—the mask was a dead giveaway.

That's no mask, she thought with the eerie calm of madness. That's his face.

Sofira was enraged at the sight of them all just standing there when she burst out of the stairwell. Like a bunch of sheep they were; no, not sheep. Sheep would have been more assertive, they would have started bleating when the monster came toward them. She gave the ceiling over their heads a three second blast just to scatter them.

Then she gave the son of a bitch with the machete a good five seconds, just to make sure she had his attention.

"Yeah, I'm talking to you!" she croaked.

The steel mask tilted to one side, as if he were thinking it over. Then all at once he lunged, not at her but at the people cowering on his right, and the machete was swinging, rising, falling, swooping. Long trails of blood, vivid and dark, flew through the air and painted the walls, the ceiling, the floor with streaks and spatters, gory hieroglyphics left by the condemned, the dying and the dead. Courtesy of their killer.

Sofira kept blasting away at him, at every part of his body. She knew she was hitting him and in spite of the fact that nothing was changing, she made sure she kept hitting him, trying to shift his attention back to her again, and failing. Trying and failing, until there was no movement anywhere around him.

Finally, he started toward her and then suddenly changed his mind—if he had a mind, thought Sofira—altering course to a pile of corpses on her left. Sofira blasted him again. When that did not work, she ran after him and flung herself into the air, aiming to hit the back of his neck first.

She remembered very clearly thinking that she had to get back on her feet before he did or she wouldn't have a chance. She also remembered, just as clearly, how he didn't go down when she bounced off.

He turned around to look at her, moving in no particular hurry as she converted her fall to an acrobat's roll, making use of the momentum to spring back up to a standing position. She gave him another two-second blast, confining it to his face.

"Goddamn, you rat-fuck bastard," she said to him. "What do I have to do to get you to come after me? Strip naked?" He seemed to be wavering, which sent Sofira's fury ratcheting up another notch. "Okay, asshole, you asked for it!" Slinging her weapon, she took a fistful of uniform in either hand and ripped it apart.

She was completely unprepared for his reaction. It had been an insane, silly, and incredibly stupid thing to do. Even as she did it, she wondered if a lack of oxygen combined with trauma had caused her

to have a psychotic break. She had expected him to turn away so that she would have to follow him, firing more rounds until she got him to turn back to her again.

Instead, his whole body seemed to bristle or spasm in some way, as if he had suddenly been hit by a bolt of lightning and instead of knocking him out, it had energized him. Even his eyes seemed to blaze more brightly within the dark holes of the mask and the murderous fury and hatred Sofira could see in them struck her with such force that she raised her weapon again.

Then he went for her.

"Okay, asshole, that's more like it!" She danced away from him toward the stairwell, firing her weapon while she shed her ripped shirt. "If I'd known your tastes were that simple, I'd have done this ages ago!"

She flung the shirt at him and fled down the stairwell, which seemed to infuriate him even more. But despite the fact that she could practically feel the rage coming off him like waves of poison gas, he never made a sound, not even a wordless, incoherent roar. Not even a grunt of effort, like the son of a bitch didn't have to breathe. Still, there was no mistaking the force of the homicidal hatred he had for her, as if she was an unspeakable and unforgivable offense to him merely because she existed.

Whatever his problem was, he was also starting to gain on her. If she wanted to stay alive, and keep offending him, she was going to have to haul ass like she had never hauled ass before.

And still, he continued to gain on her. Goddamn, but she was getting the very strong feeling that doing that thing with her shirt had been a really, really, *really* bad idea.

Fumes, she thought; she must have been crazy from the fumes.

SEVEN

Lynne had raised up from where she had been laying just in time to catch a glimpse of Lt Sofira disappearing, shirtless, into the stairwell with the monster in close pursuit. Dazed, she managed to bring herself to a sitting position with her back against the wall while she forced her mind to come up out of the fog it wanted so very much to sink into.

Her gaze fell on the security guard she had been lying next to on the floor. Unlike her, he had not been playing dead. The awful part was that he was so covered with blood that she couldn't tell whether he was the one who had been carrying the boy. She looked for the boy himself but the guard near her was the only intact body she could see. Then she realized that she was wrong about that; the guard wasn't intact after all. His head was simply still attached to his torso, which happened to be relatively complete.

Nausea surged with a force that made the world tilt sideways. Lynne clapped both hands over her mouth and pressed her back against the wall as hard as she could in an effort to steady herself. The world went on tilting relentlessly. She squeezed her eyes shut but that felt worse, like something was pressing hard on her temples and her eyeballs.

She opened her eyes again and suddenly everything seemed to be rushing at her, not just the sight of the slaughter in front of her but the terrible thick blood, the dead body smell and the painfully loud clanging and buzzing and ringing of God only knew how many alarms all at the same time. A hot, sharp spear of pain plunged from her forehead to the base of her neck; her stomach lurched and she gagged against her hands still covering her mouth.

Why are you bothering? asked a voice in her mind suddenly. Are you really concerned about staining the carpet? Her hands muffled the sound of her shocked giggle. Slowly, she took them away from her mouth. Another brief giggle escaped her, making her body jerk slightly and suddenly she knew that if she let herself go on, she would never be able to stop. Pressing the back of one fist against her

teeth, she used her free hand to push herself up to a standing position.

The scene before her was almost enough to make her close her eyes again. At the same time, she felt a strange, unnatural calm coming over her, almost as if it were something in the air around her that had suddenly begun to stick to her.

Sofira's pill. A combat drug? Or some sort of anti-trauma medication that let people wade through rivers of blood and body parts without going full tilt bughouse?

Let's see if it works. She kept her gaze locked on the top of the door to the stairwell while she fixed the mental image of a half-naked Lt Sofira running for her life with that creature snapping at her heels.

She felt steady as she stepped over the guard's body and, using the extreme limit of her peripheral vision to avoid stepping on anything that might have been someone, or part of someone, made her way over to the stairwell.

The tanky, echoing sound of footsteps pounding down the stairs came up to her from below. She leaned on the railing and peered through the small gap between the flights but it was too small for her to see anything. She pushed herself upright and started down the steps.

What the fuck do you think you're doing, her mind blared at her? You don't have any equipment to record any of this, you don't even have your phone. You've just witnessed a mass murder and you almost got slaughtered yourself which means you're walking around in a state of shock. And you're still having trouble breathing. What the fuck do you think you're doing?

She went on stumping stiffly down one step after another, one flight after another, one floor after another, until she knew she had to be well past the level where the security guards had forced them to start climbing. There were still many more floors beyond that; she hadn't realized earlier just how many.

No, and you still don't, her mind ranted. You have no concept of how far down this death-trap actually goes. It's a lot farther than you can imagine; much, much, farther than they let everyone believe. One fuck of a lot farther than they thought they were going to go. You

know how for every distance there's always a point that's too far to come back from? Farther than even that, so much farther, so very much.

She didn't pause even to take half a second to clear the mild dizziness out of her eyes. If Waxie had ever thought he was an expert on bad news, this was going to bomb his world and make his planets twirl. He would probably have to give it all up after this, retreat to a sanatorium on the moon for a while before he was up to something as strenuous as retiring. When she was done with him, he'd never call anything else bad news for as long as he lived.

There was a sudden, ominous *boom* far below and she felt the railing vibrating in her hand, Bottom level, she thought with a certainty she couldn't have explained even if she'd wanted to Bottom level, last stop. The end.

She wasn't really quite as certain about that last. Putting it out of her mind, she continued her descent.

If he lived, Cosgrove thought, the first thing he was going to do was ask Sofira why she had gone all the way down to the grid-access level. Then he was going to ask her how she had missed noticing that one of the civilians had not only survived the massacre uninjured but had also followed her and the hostile down to the grid room, after which he would ask her assistance in assembling all the data recorded by the security cams and sensors so he could work out the exact order of events from the moment Mara showed dead to when he was finally able to determine the number of survivors. Whether or not she wanted to explain her reasons for being out of uniform while engaging the enemy was a matter he would leave completely up to her.

But that was *if* he lived and he wasn't putting any money on that yet.

"Sir, we have reached the bottom level in the number three stairwell and are holding position," said a voice in his comm link.

"Sir, holding rock bottom in stairwell number four," another voice added.

"Copy that, three and four," he said, his voice barely audible to himself. "We are in position in access tube overlooking grid room."

"Lieutenant Sofira?" asked the first voice timidly.

"Swinging from the chandelier." Cosgrove put his eye back to the peep-hole just to make sure he was still right. He was, although to be more precise, Sofira wasn't actually swinging, only hanging upside down by her knees and firing her weapon from time to time at the big bastard standing directly underneath her. And she wasn't hanging from a chandelier but from the center of the overhead framework that carried a portion of the rerouting system. Whatever that meant. Olsen had made it sound crucial on a cosmic level, but he made everything sound that way. Right now it was pretty goddamned cosmically crucial to Sofira; good thing for her it was sturdy enough to take her weight.

How much longer she was going to be able to hang on like that was anybody's guess. Every so often, she would curl her body upward and grab hold of another part of the framework to take the strain off her knees. It was easy to see that she was starting to get tired and there wasn't enough room for her between the framework and the ceiling itself.

Christ, how the hell had she gotten up there in the first place, he wondered? It had been one hell of a trick, whatever she'd done; the next couple of minutes would determine whether she would have an even harder time getting down again.

"Three and four, listen up," he murmured. "On my signal, exit stairwells to new positions outside grid room—three, you go to the general entry point. Four, you guys get into the observation chamber, line up across the spyglass, de-opaque your side only. Copy?" He barely waited for their responses "Go."

Some period of time between twenty seconds and the first part of eternity went by before he heard their voices in his comm again, confirming their new positions.

"Now, listen up. There is a civilian in the room. Repeat: civilian in the room. She's hiding in the southwest corner, very close to the

spyglass. Capture alive if possible. Do you copy?"

"Capture, sir?"

"Yes, capture. Do not execute, but rescue is not a priority. Do you copy?" This time he didn't wait for an answer; Sofira was looking bad. "On my signal..."

Lynne had arrived just in time to see Sofira fire at the cable dangling from the framework she was clinging to near the ceiling. There was a smell of scorched rubber as it dropped uselessly to the floor thirty feet below, landing practically at the feet of the homicidal maniac who was looking up at her as if he thought she too would fall if he stared at her long enough.

"Hey, dumb shit!" Sofira yelled, giving him a two-second blast. "You were stupid to come in here after me, get the fuck out while you can, what the fuck's wrong with you?"

The lieutenant's voice, more ragged and hoarse than ever, now began cutting out completely on random syllables. She stared pointedly at the killer as she spoke but Lynne knew whom the words had really been meant for. She intended to do as she was told but instead of running back out the way she had come, she found herself taking cover behind a stack of crates in the nearest corner.

"Now I know you gotta be the all-time dumbest of the dumb-asses!" Sofira yelled, firing at the killer again.

Lynne nodded silently as she sat hugging her knees tightly to her chest, trying to make herself as small as possible. That's right, lieutenant, I'm the all-time dumbest of the dumb-asses. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what you're doing. I don't know what the fuck's wrong with me. She willed herself to let go of her knees, get up and run like hell. But when she finally forced her arms to move, it was so she could shift position and peer around the crates.

He knows I'm in here. The thought came unbidden, out of nowhere, as irrational as any paranoia. But not paranoia. He senses me, somehow. Smells me, maybe, or... Her mind seemed to go blank

for some unmeasured period of time. Then all at once, the room blew up.

He had sensed more life forms in the building, and knew that they would be looking for him, thinking they could kill him. Right now, however, there was the half-naked woman overhead, pumping power directly into him. Each time she fired on him, the mechanisms in his body went into a frenzy of activity, assimilating the energy and materials. They had stopped deflecting projectiles sometime ago and were now absorbing everything, integrating it into his body, finding ways to store whatever wasn't needed immediately. He could feel them rushing through him in high gear, could feel how they craved for the woman to give them more even as he craved to get his hands on her and tear her in half; at the same time, the mechanisms were frantic at being so close to the source of power. It was closer now than it ever had been, only a few yards beneath his feet.

The woman would die. Then he would go to the power source, the way the nanos inside of him were demanding, and let himself be suffused with the radiation. The life forms would come to him as they always did.

The dangling woman fired on him yet again. As the shot penetrated, he felt a strange new spasm squeeze him deep inside; then suddenly, for the briefest moment, he turned to stone.

The sensation released him almost immediately but for the first time, he felt something that bordered on uncertainty.

Instinct told him that the problem had to do with those things inside of him. It seemed that all those billions of mechanisms that powered him and fed his strength and made improvements and repairs had certain vulnerabilities that he did not. Even though they were not life, they were not anti-life, either. They were machines, just machines and machines could be destroyed. All machines, no matter what they were, no matter how large or how small, complex or simple, were all fashioned by the minds and hands of living creatures and could be destroyed. He knew; the live things had used a

multitude of different machines against him with intentions of either defending themselves or destroying him and he had reduced them all, machines and humans alike, to wreckage.

And now he had machines inside of him. His body had been overrun by human-made machines, mechanisms created by the living. They could be controlled by the living, and broken by the living. And these flawed mechanism that had rebuilt him, operating inside him now, made up his physical being to such an extent that there was no possibility of ever getting them out again.

The rage and hatred Jason Voorhees embodied, not as the unfortunate casualty of cruelty and neglect, but as a monster created by the very things that had killed him, suddenly bloomed all over again with a terrible force, exploding with a new level of intensity. At the exact same moment, everything around him exploded with life.

A long rectangular section of wall to his right suddenly shattered like glass as humans hurled themselves into the room, firing their weapons at him. More of them streamed through the doorway behind him while others quickly lowered themselves one by one down a rope from an opening in the wall facing him. They were screaming. He could hear their live voices over the sirens and alarms that had not yet cut out; screaming and firing their weapons at him as if they could actually damage him, as if they would still be alive after this.

He raised the machete in one hand and reached for the nearest human throat with the other.

"Chief!" Cosgrove was barely able to mask his shock at finding Estep under the desk with him. Estep was well down the list of grunts he had expected would survive this long. Obviously, he had seriously underestimated this kid. Either that or there was a god and he was definitely on Estep's side.

"Chief, you *gotta* look at this..."

The tablet Estep was shoving under his nose wasn't military issue but one of those clunky 8 X 10s the scientists carried around,

possibly to build up their biceps; the things weighed at least three ounces, more if they had fancy attachments like this one.

"What am I looking at?" Cosgrove snapped impatiently over Estep's stream of excited chatter. "Plain and simple, ten seconds or less."

"It's him." Estep thumbed something on the edge of the screen and Cosgrove found himself staring at a 3D schematic of the monster. "He's not human, he's full of nanos..."

"Cyborg?" Cosgrove frowned suspiciously.

"No, I dunno what he is," Estep went on, "but he's full of nanos like nothing I've ever seen and they're about to choke!"

Cosgrove's frown intensified.

"They've been eating the ammo for him, making him stronger, but they're close to capacity. All we gotta do is keep firing at him and they'll overload, shut right down."

"Then what?" asked Cosgrove. "He blows up and takes us all with him?"

"No, he shuts down with them," Estep said, almost tripping over his words with excitement. "Knocks him right out. Then all we gotta do is hook him up to the right amount of current and it'll keep his nanos frozen. See, the electrical charge of..."

"Shut up and do it," Cosgrove barked, shoving him away as he slid out from under the desk and began blasting away again at the creature in the center of the room.

Up near the ceiling, Sofira was holding on with both arms and legs and trying to keep track of what was going on below. Every joint in her body seemed to be on fire, particularly her shoulders, her internal filters had pretty much failed altogether, and she had just heard, among the chaotic chorus of voices in her comm link, that the power station had sustained irreversible damage from the incendiary shot they had been using.

Like the woods around Veronica Lake, she thought. The feds must have sent in a disaster crew by now, perhaps two crews, one for the

woods and one for the power station.

Only... what orders had the second group been given, she wondered? Scan for recoverable personnel? Or something more along the lines of Cosgrove's own orders concerning the civilian?

Capture alive if possible. Rescue is not a priority.

Or maybe something far simpler. Secure and seal, set containment level at one hundred percent.

Well, that was the only safe way to handle a heavily damaged power station; enclose the whole thing in a shielded container and then launch the entire mess into space on a one-way trip to Nobody Cares.

End of story. Oh, except they would probably all get medals for their collective bravery under extreme circumstances. Posthumously, of course, but it was the spirit of the thing. Brave was brave, whether you were still around afterwards or not, and if not, then it was the sincere hope of everyone on the highest command level that getting a medal would make you feel a lot better about being dead. You might even be proud.

She felt her eyes trying to roll up in her head and wrapped her arms and legs more securely around the metal pieces she was clinging to. It might be easier to keep herself from passing out if she looked around for some means of getting herself down. Then she could order one of the guys to give her the top part of his uniform so she could rest in fully-clothed peace.

With absolutely no idea or plan in mind, Sofira began slowly pulling herself head first toward a corner of the room. Her shoulders immediately roared into burning protest along with her hips and knees. She told herself she was ignoring all of it even as she grunted between clenched teeth and tears squeezed out of the corners of her eyes to drop thirty feet to the floor below.

She had travelled only a couple of inches when all at once something blue happened.

In some distant part of her mind, Lynne knew that what she was seeing didn't make any sense at all. Which had to be why she couldn't do anything; not blink, not move, not speak, not even breathe.

Something blue was happening; emphatically, intensely, and genuinely blue and it was happening to everything in every possible way. After a bit, she could make out long bright lines extending from the guards' weapons to the creature in the middle of the room. There were hundreds of these lines, perhaps thousands, lines of brilliant blue light, each taking its own path and never becoming lost or muddled up with any of the others. They circled the now motionless creature from top to bottom but with a minute bit of space between each line so that he was still partly visible.

More time passed, unmeasured and immeasurable, and she saw that the blue lines of light also rose up from his head, extending all the way to the ceiling, where they spread out until they covered every part of it.

Movement. Not from the monster, but from somewhere overhead. A slow, easy, sagging sort of movement, like a lightweight pebble making a sluggish descent through an extremely viscous liquid. There was another movement, then—but a movement that she felt rather than saw—as if a ripple had travelled through the room, affecting every bit of matter from the nano level all the way up to the realm of human perception and beyond.

She blinked. When her eyes opened again, the blue moment had passed. Only one brilliant line of blue light was still real; it ran from the center of the monster's torso to what looked like a stack of tablets wired into a console. One of the guards was hovering around it looking like he couldn't decide whether this was the best thing that had ever happened to him or the last few moments of his life.

With no warning, the monster toppled over backwards. The whole room shook when he hit the floor. Several of the guards started to raise their weapons but the young guy at the console yelled for them to stop, no, don't fire, it was okay, this was good, this was good.

Lynne blinked again at the sight of Lieutenant Sofira rising slowly to her feet from a spot on the floor right next to where the monster had been standing. However she had gotten down from the ceiling,

she couldn't have fallen; she was obviously unhurt but (also obviously) still half-naked.

Judging from the look on her face, Sofira seemed as baffled by this development as anyone else. As Lynne watched, she suddenly seemed to shake it off and turned to the guard on her right.

"You! Give me your shirt, right now!" she snapped. "That's an order, mister!"

The guy never hesitated, pulling the shirt off over his head without bothering to unfasten the front. Sofira put it on the same way and immediately turned to point at Lynne.

Lynne opened her mouth to say something but a guard already had her wrist locked in a bring-along hold and was dragging her forward. She looked down as she went past the monster still lying face up and motionless on the floor and flinched, certain that she had seen a glint of awareness in those unblinking eyes.

EIGHT

"How long will he stay that way?" Sofira asked Estep tensely, staring at the large, high-resolution screen on the desktop.

"How long have you got?" Estep said. "A whole lot longer than that. I wired him directly into the pile under the floor. As long as it holds out, he's a statue."

"He's a conscious statue," Sofira corrected him. "Conscious as in awake, anyway. Not much in the way of higher brain in that skull, so I don't know how conscious he actually is, compared to us." She turned to Cosgrove; he looked oddly natural sitting in the expensive, ergonomic chair with his feet up on the glossy black desk, as if he actually belonged here in the main reception area.

The whereabouts of the real receptionist, on the other hand, was anyone's guess. No doubt he decided to relocate with all due speed as soon as he'd heard weapons-fire in the woods, even before the explosion. Hard to say for certain, though, since she hadn't stopped to check on him when she had brought the demonstrators in.

The images of their slaughter appeared before her inner eye as if some switch had been thrown. Sofira felt her teeth grinding together as she looked around in an effort to drive it out by flooding her eyes with sights in real-time.

Neither Cosgrove nor Estep paid any attention to her as she ambled over to the public seating area, where the remainder of the security team were slumped in various positions of exhaustion on the custom-made furniture or sprawled on the carpet. The journalist, meanwhile, was down at the far end of the room, staring out of the window as the choppers maneuvered in and out of the heavy smoke that rose from the woods.

Abruptly she turned her head and her gaze met Sofira's. For a moment, she seemed on the verge of saying something, then only pressed her lips together in a hard, colorless line as she turned back to look out the window again.

"Won't last for much longer out there," Sofira told her. "Probably not even another hour."

"Oh, yeah?" she said, not looking at her.

"Yeah. Can't have a fire when there's nothing left to burn."

Now the other woman's head turned back to her with a sharp attentiveness. Once again, she looked as if she were about to speak and once again she said nothing, although this time she didn't turn back to the window. "Where's Dr Olsen?" she said suddenly

"I'm sure he and his staff are safe," Sofira replied.

"Oh, yeah, I'm sure they are, too. I was just wondering where." She hesitated. "He took my phone and never gave it back."

Sofira crossed the room to look out the front window. "Your Cruiser's still parked out front. Looks like it took a little hot ash here and there and it probably smells like a chemical barbecue but I'm sure it's fine otherwise." She glanced over at Cosgrove, still looking relaxed and unruffled with his feet up on the desk. He gave her a barely perceptible nod. "I suggest you get behind the wheel and see if I'm right."

The journalist's mouth dropped open. "Are you kidding?"

Sofira made a face at her.

"They'll have the road closed," she said. "I'll never get through..."

"If you get stopped, show your credentials. Nobody'll want to delay you getting back to your important government research." She searched her pocket and came up with another dose of anti-trauma. "Eat another of these first. Helps you look honest."

The woman looked over at Cosgrove, who ignored her, and then at everyone else, her gaze finally coming to rest on Sofira again. "But that's not really, ah, it's not..."

Sofira pushed the pill at her. "It's not anything but how you're going to get out of here." Lynne took the pill, hesitated, then put it in her mouth and swallowed.

"Wise move. Sorry you lost your phone, as well as all that other stuff. Makes it kind of hard to compose a detailed account of what happened. I mean, I'm sure your memory's great, even better than average, but without any sort of record or notes..." she shrugged. "I'm no expert on this but even I know you can't publish news you can't substantiate."

"But don't worry, I'm sure Dr Olsen or someone from PR'll be in touch in a few days with a media release detailing today's unfortunate incident. Complete with true-color photos."

"But..."

Sofira reached over and opened the front door. "Will you get the fuck outta here before my boss changes his mind?"

The journalist hesitated, looking around again. Then, to Sofira's great relief, she got smart and got gone.

The unmarked black chopper arrived half an hour later, setting down neatly in the parking lot in full whisper-mode. Probably just to show off, Sofira thought, watching from the still open front door as the rotors slowed to a stop. The feds loved all that extra luxury features shit . Just couldn't get enough of it.

She had expected Olsen to be the first one out, looking smug and important but in his highfalutin', elegant way. But as it turned out, he wasn't among the eight people who stepped gingerly down the small set of steps that telescoped from the passenger compartment. Sofira didn't recognize any of them, which set off a warning bell in her mind, although she couldn't have said exactly why.

She stepped back from the doorway, poised to introduce herself but they walked past her as if she were invisible, heading straight for Cosgrove. Another warning bell went off in her mind as she stared after them. The idea flashed through her mind suddenly that she should have planted her ass in the passenger seat of the journalist's shiny red Cruiser. Then she pushed it away and took a step in the same direction, only to see Cosgrove put one hand up and give his head a brief, firm shake.

Her head was now full of warning bells and something of it must have shown in her face, because Cosgrove did a double-take and frowned at her. Immediately, she composed herself and took a few casual steps towards the rest of the security team. When he looked away, she moved back over near the open door, surreptitiously adjusting the volume on her comm link.

She didn't expect Cosgrove to forget he had left the channel between them open. On the other hand, he probably wouldn't remember she could access at least a couple of the frequencies in the receptionist's console. It took a moment as there was a lot of interference but once she had them, they came in perfectly clear.

"Pzzzzt... not one of yours?" asked a strange voice.

"Absolutely not," Cosgrove replied. "You've studied the specs we sent?"

"I have," said a different voice. "Courtesy of this young man here, Estep?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Estep. He sounded so desperately eager to please that Sofira wanted to kick him. He started to go on hurriedly about the right electrical charges immobilizing nano mechanisms but mercifully Cosgrove stopped him after a few seconds.

"The question is," said a third voice, "can we remove him from his current location and transport him to the project?"

Estep started to answer. "I can rig..."

"Estep assures me that he can rig up a portable energy source with enough capacity for the duration of the journey," Cosgrove said, talking over him. "Then hook him up again on the other end."

There was total silence for a several seconds and Sofira had to force herself not to turn around and look directly at them. If Cosgrove noticed, he'd understand immediately that she was eavesdropping.

Finally, she heard one of the strangers say, "I see," and realized that all of them had just been listening to instructions on their own comms.

"All right, Estep," said the same voice after a moment. "You rig up this device and when it's ready, we'll remove him." Pause. "And all of you."

"Say again?" Now Cosgrove sounded uneasy.

"The power station's finished," said someone else. Sofira wasn't sure if she had spoken before or not. "It's leaking radiation, toxic gas—total loss. We'll have to seal it off, remove it piece by piece, and start over."

"Dr Olsen must be devastated," Cosgrove said dryly. Sofira hid a grin behind one hand; she had just been thinking the same thing.

"'Devastated' is one way to put it. He's just as irradiated as all of you are. We've made separate arrangements for him and any of his staff who were affected. You and your team will be transferred to a facility that can provide the very best in specialized care."

"I see," said Cosgrove. "However, I believe if you check our radiation strips—"

"Radiation is a tricky thing," said another voice, impatient now. "We've discovered that so-called safe levels can vary from person to person. If we took chances with our people in the military, well, it would be unforgivable." Pause. "You have received your orders, haven't you?"

"Just now," Cosgrove replied.

"Well, then. You'll supervise Estep."

"It'll take four or five to remove—"

"The disaster team can handle that part. We've arranged transport for the rest of your people." Pause. "Now."

Cosgrove stood up and raised his voice. "Lieutenant Sofira."

"Yes, sir." She snapped to attention.

He jerked his chin at the door. "We're being transferred." One of the strangers leaned over and said something to him. "Okay, listen up," he called over to the others. They came to attention with an easy swiftness that belied their apparent weariness. "Catch your ride at the front gate with Sofira. We'll catch up with you later."

Sofira met his gaze as he turned back to her and for a moment, she thought she detected more than a little apprehension.

"See you on the other side," Cosgrove told her.

"Yes, sir," she said.

As it turned out, they were both wrong.

Lynne Bowes had heard the name Hyacinth Stein before, or at least, she thought she had. It sounded familiar, although she couldn't associate it with anything more specific than something scientific.

The name had sure meant something to Professor Morse, though. He had been surprised to hear from Lynne in the first place but far more surprised to hear the name Hyacinth Stein from her.

"This is quite a swerve," he had said, his deep voice rattling the speaker of her disposable phone. "The last time I saw you, you were whining about wanting to spend all summer in the mountains. Suddenly you're throwing around names like Hyacinth Stein and talking about government research projects. What happened to you, Ms Bowes? Did you hit your head?"

"It's a long story, professor."

He had chuckled genially. "I've got time."

"Unfortunately I don't."

"Oh?" The smile had gone out of his voice immediately. "And why is that? What's your hurry?"

"That's a long story, too."

"Is something wrong? I, uh, can't help but noticing that you're calling on a disposable phone. Terrible waste of money, those things, unless you really want to conceal the exact location you're calling from."

Lynne smiled with half her mouth. She had moved into a hotel near the airport and (very reluctantly) sold her car, just as a precaution, although as far as she could tell, no one was looking for her. "You don't really want to hear about some woman's complicated personal life and a stalker ex-boyfriend and why she decided to do something less visible than skiing, do you?" She was amazed to find the words coming to her practically as she said them. Had she always had this talent for lying or was it something she had developed after almost having her head cut off with a machete?

"Oh, God, Lynne, I'm so sorry," Morse told her feelingly. "I had no idea, you don't have to say any more. I'll be happy to help you in any way that I can."

"Ah. Well, thank you, professor," she said, feeling slightly guilty now.

"I do have an inside line on several ongoing projects," he said briskly. "Including Dr Stein's. Although I have to tell you, that one is all but impossible to get into. It's the highest of the high level

government-funded, military-sponsored projects. Most of the interns were hand-picked and at least half of them are on active military duty."

Lynne sighed. "I see..."

"Wait, dear, you didn't let me finish." Morse chuckled. "It would be all but impossible to get into, but it so happens that they're short of an intern due to an unexpected departure."

"Really?" Lynne kept her voice casual. "What happened?"

"Oh, I don't know the details, just that someone left early. In any case, if you're really interested in this, I can get you in as the replacement."

"That'd be great, professor," Lynne said, meaning it. "I had no idea you had such pull."

"Hyacinth Stein and I shared a lab table in grad school way back when. If I recommend you, she'll give it extra consideration." Morse gave a small, slightly apologetic laugh. "Of course, I can't absolutely guarantee that she'll take you. There's no such thing as a sure thing."

"But you'd say it's pretty likely, right?" Lynne asked, hoping she didn't sound too anxious.

"Sure, especially if she needs to replace someone on short notice like this. You might find yourself out of your depth on some things but I'm sure you'll be able to get up to speed with little or no trouble."

"Yeah, I learn fast. Thanks, professor."

He chatted for a further five minutes before he finally let her go with a firm reminder that she should call him if she needed anything, and really, he meant that, anything at all.

Nice guy, she thought, feeling another surge of guilt. Professor Morse always had struck her as being a nice guy—and certainly a lot nicer than the other two members in the professorial triumvirate that ran the Engineering and Science Faculty, Hold and Kane. But up until now she had had no idea of how sympathetic he was on certain kinds of issues. It made her feel a bit sleazy for using him that way. But then again, it wasn't like she was deceiving him for personal gain or to hurt anyone.

Just the opposite, in fact; besides, she had gotten pretty far on her own—with a few hours of judiciously searching certain records and

following a rather oblique route, she had managed to trace Lieutenant Sofira specifically to Hyacinth Stein and this project. Lucky for her that whoever was keeping records for the military hadn't bothered to deliberately hide anything, deciding instead that this kind of information was too obscure for most people to bother with. There was just so much information being generated, about so many different things, that those assigned with security and watching over it couldn't control it. Who watches the watchmen? Lynne thought. I do.

If finding out Rena Sofira's current location had been relatively easy, getting anywhere near her or the truth about the creature who had massacred so many people at Three Mile Island was darned difficult. Even with her nifty credentials from Dr Olsen, she wouldn't have been able to get into the government project without a little help. Hell, she wouldn't even have been able to get the exact address.

Yes, Professor Morse was definitely one of the good guys, Lynne thought. She had a feeling, however, that his old classmate Hyacinth Stein wasn't anything like him. Lynne tried not to think about what was facing her, Hyacinth Stein or anyone or anything else. She turned on the TV for wallpaper and tried to doze.

Some time later, Lynne woke up with a start from a nightmare where she was at a huge conference, and couldn't find anyone she knew, and couldn't find her way out to get home. The TV was still on, some old movie from Prevac Earth; at least the cable station had not gone off air, and the TV wasn't tuned to a dead channel.

And at least it wasn't snowing, she saw, looking out of the hotel window, though a heavy rain was dropping from the sky. She craned round to look out of the top of the window, but the sky was dark with no sign of a moon or any stars. It was a dark and stormy night, she thought. Then she laughed at herself for going into Bulwer-Lytton mode.

But she didn't laugh for long. She felt an overwhelming sense of isolation. Perhaps it was the anticipation of going undercover into a

dangerous situation, to a research project where she might encounter... Well, she shoved that thought to the back of her mind, along with everything else to do with Three Mile Island and Dr Olsen's pet project.

Perhaps it was the rain. Perhaps because it was so dark, the night outside her hotel window lit only by street lamps and the flickering neon signs across the way

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At least someone out there must be having fun, she thought. They're out there rocking the night away in the eternal happy hour, and I'm in here on my own with nobody to rock me to sleep.

She cranked open the window at the top to let some air in and heard the sound of music coming closer. A car came into view, its headlights reflecting off the wet street, the beams shimmering in the rain. A window must have been open in the car and she could hear Elvis Presley singing "Return to Sender," the latest remixed remix single to hit the charts.

Dear God, thought Lynne, some things just never die. The rock n' roll singer had been dead long before Earth I had been abandoned, but his voice lived on from over five hundred years ago.

Lynne found herself wishing someone would package her up safely in a mailbag and return her to home, back to the quotidian round of Ramsey County, the Star and its regular diet of parish pump gossip and local stories. Back to the safety of CM University and the sureties of course work, essays and end-of-semester exams.

Jeez, girl, get a grip on yourself, she thought. Do you want to lose yourself in some pastoral backwater, or do you want to be a real investigative reporter?

She already knew the answer, and it was the same answer she had been carrying around with her ever since she was nine, a bright and sparky young kid growing up in a small, conservative town that was just too small to contain her. I want to make a difference. No secret that the intrepid reporter can't uncover, no injustice that can't be exposed to the light of day. No monster that can't be revealed.

On the TV, Robert Redford was saying to Dustin Hoffman "Deny, deny, deny!" But nobody was going to deny Lynne her chance to make a difference.

All of which left her resolute, determined, and desperately lonely. She looked at the disposable phone on which she had called Professor Morse. It had a few more minutes left, and she had bought a second one as backup. No harm in using it to call an old pal, she thought.

Looking at her watch, she saw it was almost three in the morning, that lowest of low points in the human circadian rhythm; the time when the heart gave out and people died. And she knew exactly who to call, who would be up at this hour.

"Allo?" said the voice of Kendall, in his best impression of a French accent.

"Meestair Kendall?" Lynne asked, trying to join in with her own version of the accent.

"Oui, j'écoute," said Kendall. "Ça va, Lynne?"

"Ça va bien. Yeah, I'm fine. So what's my favorite design and layout guy doing at three in the morning?"

"Watching *All the President's Men* on cable. What are you up to at the witching hour?"

Lynne looked closely for the first time at the movie on her hotel room TV. Robert Redford was talking again to Dustin Hoffman. She laughed.

"Kendall, you would not believe me if I told you."

"I believe. I believe the truth is out there and I believe you're going to find it. Or it's going to find you. I believe in you, kiddo, and I believe you're watching the same movie as me."

"True. Great minds, huh?"

"Great? My mind? Must be true if you say so, kiddo. Because you got a great mind, and you're the woman who knows. Who knows what evil lurks within the hearts of men."

"Yeah, me and the Shadow," said Lynne. It was always reassuring to talk to someone who had so many of the same cultural reference points as her. Kendall had spent a lifetime fascinated by the twentieth and twenty-first century cultures of the dead planet. Lynne

had had a pretty strong interest in this herself, and a year of working on the weekly, where Kendall was the only regular staffer apart from Waxie, had reinforced that interest and deepened her knowledge.

"Waxie's going frantic. He's called in a freelancer to help get this week's edition together, but there's a great big Lynne-shaped hole in the reporting, not to mention the hole left by the nonappearance of your Olsen interview. He's making discreet enquiries, but he says you were kind of undercover on that one, so he doesn't dare contact anyone up there in case he blows your cover. Something bad happened up there. The government's not saying much, but the whole area's sealed off, military all over, and rumors are running wild."

"What happened up there was more than bad, K. I was lucky to get out at all. So, right now I'm still undercover. Don't ask me where, because I can't tell you."

"So what evil are you investigating?"

"One that lurks within the heart of a woman, but that's all I'm telling you, K. This one is serious and I'm in way over my head. The less you know about it, the safer for you."

Kendall sounded more serious. "You doing something dangerous, kiddo? Wrap that old First Amendment around you, freedom of the press."

"I don't know, K. I'm going to a place where the First Amendment and the rest of the Constitution don't apply."

"You'll be OK, L. There's no place where the law of gravity doesn't apply, and so long as that goes, you can always jump up, up and away. With one mighty bound Lynne was free..."

Lynne laughed. "I don't feel much like Supergirl right now."

"Yeah, L, well, just turn on that 30,000 candle power smile of yours if you're in a situation where you want someone to believe you, and you'll be fine. That smile will dazzle them so they won't be able to see anything except what you want them to."

"You're a sweetheart, K. But you're the only person who ever thought I had a nice smile."

"Nice? That smile can light up a room, kiddo."

She looked at the disposable phone. There was an orange light winking, a signal that only a minute was left, at most. Any moment it would go red and the phone would be dead, silent and used up.

"Listen, K, my phone time is going to run out. Just keep my seat warm, OK?"

"Warm and toasty, L. Though office basketball is pretty much a drag without our star player. Anyway, kiddo, just remember that..."

The phone went dead. Lynne had a heavy feeling in the pit of her stomach that she was never going to find out what it was Kendall wanted her to remember.

PART TWO

NINE

What science needed, thought Dr Hyacinth Stein, were more monsters. Monsters were the ideal experimental subjects. She was sitting with her feet up on the desk in her office, gazing fondly, even lovingly at the image on the screen propped up on her thighs. Every few seconds, the camera angle on the creature strapped to the table in the lab next door would change, rotating through a dozen different angles in true-life color and res.

It made for a reasonably good remote inspection of a specimen in temporary quarantine, Stein supposed, although she would have preferred at least three times that many cams. No, make it five times as many, plus a couple of remote control mobile scanning units with enhanced zoom and magnification. If she'd had just a little more notice, that was exactly the setup she'd have been using right now. But the specimen had arrived with no warning; by the time she had been notified the creature was even on the premises, the detail of soldiers who had delivered him had already sealed the lab.

But at least the two weeks were almost over; only thirty hours of quarantine to go. She could stand it, she thought, absently stroking the left side of her face with her index finger. The new skin there was so completely integrated now that she could no longer feel where the wound had been. Her new graft process had been every bit as successful as she had hoped, marking a major breakthrough in tissue regeneration. Healing had progressed twice as quickly while requiring only half the standard amount of nano.

All told, it had been an exceptionally good week progress-wise. If she were able to maintain the same rate of advance, she had estimated that by this time next year, she would have subjects routinely growing back extremities like hands and feet in a matter of hours, bringing her that much closer to realizing the military's ultimate vision of self-repairing combat units that would never actually have to leave the battlefield.

The big hurdle was finding a way to increase the soldiers' systemic tolerance to the inherent toxicity of the nano mechanisms while at

the same time reducing the quantity of nano that each soldier had to host for efficient self-repair in the field.

Of course, the leading intellects in the nano and life sciences communities were all but unanimously agreed that this two-headed problem was insurmountable. Hyacinth Stein found their solidarity as amusing as their opinion; it seemed to her that the leading intellects were always declaring one thing or another to be insurmountable with all the eagerness and determination of a pack of animals marking their territory to protect the group mind from interlopers.

In that spirit, she thought it must have given them extraordinary pleasure to find a problem of the two-headed variety to pounce on. The last project of hers deemed worthy to receive the official imprimature of insurmountable from the leading intellects had been the portable nano repair bed, which had definitely been a problem of the nonexotic and quite mundane single-headed variety. They had been extremely vociferous about it, too. Hyacinth Stein hadn't been quite so amused on that particular occasion, however, because she had been secretly afraid that they were right.

How relieved she had been when things had turned out otherwise! And only then had she understood how much stress the whole issue had put her under. No, correction: how much stress she had *allowed* it to put on her. Never again, she had promised herself afterwards. It was the military that was setting her assignments for her, not the leading intellects, and it was the military she had to answer to.

When she had accepted the position as head of this particular area of Research and Development for the military, it had seemed as if she had agreed to take on the impossible right from the start. None of what they asked her to do was new or unheard of. Many before her had already failed to eliminate the standard, full-sized repair table from the medical treatment equation, and not because they were stupid. She had plugged away at the problem with a gut-level certainty of having nothing to lose which had somehow imbued her with an oddly weightless, almost carefree feeling. It didn't actually make the work any easier but it did make her willing to try certain things that her predecessors had refused even to consider.

Consequently, she had managed to prove those leading intellects wrong by reducing the nano table, with all its unwieldy attachments, power requirements, and other bells and whistles to a stretcher portable enough to be carried quickly to and from areas of combat. It was a good result by itself, as no one else had ever been able to develop a mobile version of the table equal to even the most stripped-down version of the standard model.

But that result hadn't been good enough for the military. There was still too much downtime, they told her; a stretcher required two units to transport and operate. Combined with the injured unit which would have to be removed for the duration of repair, this made a total of three soldiers engaged in non-combat activity for every injury. Thus, if one hundred soldiers were injured, there would actually be three hundred out of action. The idea was to keep combat units in combat. Try again, Dr Stein.

So she had tried again. Right now, she was still at the stage where combat units were suddenly dropping into comas or going straight into fatal anaphylactic shock and she just couldn't seem to get past that. What a terrible waste of experimental subjects that was. She had had to discard over four dozen in the last thirty days and although that was a vast improvement over the previous rates of loss, it was still unacceptable. Sometimes, she had been forced to suspend operations for upwards of forty-five, or even sixty hours until replacement subjects arrived. Preparing them ate up more hours, depending on what kind of condition they were in. Programs had to be revised, measuring instruments recalibrated; it was so annoying.

But this subject was a different story. Incredibly dangerous, yes, and given what his records said, she had to face the very real possibility that she might lose a few lab personnel to the much steeper than average learning curve. Well, that just couldn't be helped. She just hoped she wouldn't have to lose any more to sheer stupidity and insubordination, like the one she had been forced to dispose of for violating quarantine. Bastard. Fortunately, it seemed to be a lot easier to replace staff members than experimental subjects; the bastard's replacement had arrived in record time. Apparently what Gunnar Gottmund had told her had as much truth

in it as ass-kissing flattery. There really were more than a few people who would jump at the chance to work with the eminent Dr Hyacinth Stein.

She only hoped that there wouldn't be any more sad little girls like Zelda Yamaguchi among them. Anyone who didn't have the stomach to face the realities of this kind of research was a drag on the outfit. If it had simply been a matter of a little squeamishness, she could have forgiven the girl; everybody was squeamish at the beginning. Even she herself had felt queasy now and then in her less experienced days. But Yamaguchi had been fretting, even crying over experimental subjects. *Crying*. Over skin-bags. For Christ's sake! Stein had heard about this sort of thing but it was the first time she had actually witnessed it personally. So annoying.

She had tried to shock some sense into the girl by showing her some unedited combat footage since combat casualties were worse than experimental failures by several magnitudes, but no such luck. Yamaguchi had only become even more unbearable. Stein had had to conclude that the woman was defective. Just couldn't cut it. Couldn't cut *anything*

And then, to add insult to injury, the military had refused her requests to have the fragile little flower transferred and replaced with someone more suitable, because supposedly, the fragile little flower was a security risk.

Stein had had a number of ideas as to how to get around that problem but the military hadn't been interested in hearing anything from her that didn't have to do with the project directly. Besides, they reminded her, hadn't she insisted back in the beginning that she not be burdened with administrative matters? Indeed she had, and a good thing, too. It was Hyacinth Stein's experience that you had to make it utterly clear as to what you did and did not do. Otherwise you could find yourself filling out forms for the convenience of some bean counter instead of doing something real.

But perhaps Yamaguchi would change her tune now that they had this subject in the lab. Not only was he absolutely unkillable, he also seemed to lack any pain receptors. According to the somewhat sketchy data that had come in with him, he had always been like that,

even before the introduction of nanos into his body. Which, to make things even stranger, registered at more than ten times the level that had proved fatal for the toughest human subject she had on record.

This was the result she had been working for and it had just come out of nowhere, dropping into her lap like manna from heaven. Most of the hard parts had been taken care of for her. She would have liked to know by whom and how and, in a perfect world, she might have dropped everything to find out. But seeing as how there was no such thing as a perfect world in the first place, it didn't really matter. The military was paying her to get certain results and at last they had had the supreme consideration to supply her with the proper materials.

What an incredible specimen this was. What an incredible opportunity she had. Oh, this was going to be very, very good. Here was a subject that could not be permanently hurt or incapacitated. As soon as Yamaguchi understood the nature and properties of this new specimen, she would have to straighten up and stop acting like they were experimenting on kittens and puppies. Hyacinth Stein wrinkled her nose in revulsion at the thought. Animal experimentation; *ugh*.

Now there was something she could neither understand nor countenance. Mammals were not interchangeable; rodents were rodents, pigs were pigs, and primates were primates; not hairy people with opposable thumbs on their feet. One was not an acceptable substitute for the other.

And that wasn't even taking into account the stark truth at the heart of the matter, that human beings only ever got what they asked for. If they asked for advances in things like, say, enhanced physical capabilities for combat personnel and onsite solutions for casualties that were more efficient and less wasteful, then they just had to pay the price. That went for all human beings, no matter who they were. No one was exempt, because sooner or later, they would all see some kind of benefit, directly or indirectly.

What this ultimately came down to in Dr Stein's view was that if you were human, you were inherently deserving of anything that happened to you, good or bad, while the only truly innocent creatures were, in fact, animals. Hyacinth Stein *loved* animals.

Which was why she found it so annoying that there were numerous instances in the reports she had been given where the creature in the next room was referred to or described as an animal. Erroneous nomenclature; oh, how she hated erroneous nomenclature! Bad enough when it came from non-scientists, although not exactly remarkable when you considered that most people were incapable of uttering even one grammatically correct sentence in their native language. But to have to hear it from educated individuals who should have known better was so annoying. Especially in this case. This subject, she checked the name, this Jason Voorhees was most definitely not an animal.

He was what she had been working for, what the military was paying her a fortune to develop for them. Jason Voorhees was the Super Soldier. All she had to do was figure out how he had gotten that way and then produce about 999,999 more just like him. Give or take a thousand.

In many ways, the complex was a typical military installation. It was entirely subterranean, excessively funded, overly secure, relentlessly monitored, and not quite as difficult to get into as it was to get out of. It was rigorously maintained, meticulously equipped, carefully staffed, and never questioned. The only thing it wasn't was pretentiously named. It was so absolutely and irrevocably secret that it wasn't named at all, which was a genuine first for Earth II's military establishment, although perhaps understandable in light of the fact that Hyacinth Stein had been put in charge.

In fact, if the truth had been told, it was as much Dr Stein's involvement as it was the nature of the project itself that demanded adherence to all of the aforementioned conditions. Especially the matter of careful staffing. Given the circumstances, it was impossible to be too careful about the staffing.

It was only logical, then, that most of the staff would be military. And even so, it didn't mean being any less careful. Prospects were identified by test scores; they were transported to isolated areas and

retested for days without being told why. There were a few candidates who registered the right psychological profile but were in the wrong field of study; they were persuaded to see the wisdom, or at least the profitability, of a change in career.

Finding high-level scientific personnel, however, was a different problem altogether. For one thing, they had to be acceptable to Dr Stein, and Dr Stein categorically refused to be burdened with either the search or selection process. Eventually, someone managed to convince her that she could at least provide a list of names and she did, with the proviso that certain of her choices were mandatory and non-negotiable. The military agreed but only if it could also designate a few mandatory, non-negotiable names of its own. Hyacinth Stein replied that as long as her instructions were followed exactly, she didn't care what the military required.

Of course, not all the people that Dr Stein had marked as mandatory wanted to accept her invitation, but this didn't create any problems for her or for the military. Just for them.

"Where are you, Bowes?"

Lynne smiled to herself without any real mirth. "You sound nervous, Waxie."

"Nervous. That's rich." He blew out a short breath. "I'm annoyed, Bowes. With you, in case you didn't know. I get that way when one of my employees doesn't come in to work for two weeks. Especially when said employee was on the scene of a major incident and, instead of delivering the story of the century, craps out completely, leaving me with nothing but government-sanctioned puff pieces about sabotage perpetrated by misguided eco-fanatics and heroic security guards giving their lives to protect us all from—"

"I know, Waxie, it's all over the news." Lynne chuckled grimly. "Now, think about this one: suppose this employee of yours had come back with the story of the century? Everyone else on the planet would still be going with those government-sanctioned puff pieces about bad protestors and military heroes. Except for the Ramsey

County Star, a weekly hard copy piece of sheet nobody's ever heard of except the locals, who use it mainly to line the bottom of hamster cages. And don't give me your old line about how many people read it and how huge the area it covers is: that's because the county is bigger than some of the states back in Prevac America. So, just suppose the RC Star runs this crazy, paranoid fantasy about the government covering up a mass..." She cut off. "Well, I think you can see the point I'm trying to make."

There was a brief silence.

"Speaking of paranoid, did you happen to notice that some of those puff pieces include mention of unconfirmed reports that one of the saboteurs was a sympathetic journalist? Managed to gain entry to the power station with forged credentials from some other project."

"Pretty specific for unconfirmed, don't you think?" Lynne asked evenly.

"Are you going to tell me where you are, or does this constitute your official resignation?" he snapped. "If it does, you're going to have go easy on the disposable phones. Pretty expensive habit for someone without a job."

"You're lovely to be concerned, Waxie. Even though you're annoyed, too." She chuckled. "I have to say, I rather like the fact that a disposable phone won't disclose my location. Having that kind of secrecy makes me feel like a spy. Kinda sexy."

"Is that what you're doing now? Working as a spy? Or just feeling kinda sexy?"

Lynne chuckled again with real humor.

"I prefer not to answer on an insecure phone."

"Does that mean I'm never going to find out what really happened out there?"

"When I know, Waxie, you'll know."

"And what are you doing right now?"

"I'm going to find out."

"Bowes..."

"Gotta go, Waxie. I've got a schedule to keep." She broke the connection. Then she picked up her suitcase and headed briskly

through the airport to catch her flight, dropping the phone in a trash can on the way.

TEN

This time, the phone rang just before Omar Wing stepped into the shower, rather than right after he had covered himself from head to foot with lather. A startling variation from the usual but not unwelcome, not a bit. Only Hyacinth Stein possessed the unerring instinct for timing her calls at the most inconvenient moment of his shower. Ergo, the caller wasn't Dr Stein. That alone was cause for celebration or, at the very least, a few minutes in a good mood. He hit the voice-only receiver above the towel rack.

"Yes?"

"Um..." the caller hesitated. "Omar?"

He sighed. "Yes, you have reached Omar Wing, he said, speaking a little more slowly and clearly than normal. "And who might you be?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake," said Ramirez Gold. "Why don't you just put on your screen? Then neither of us would have to guess."

"Why, I'm fine, Goldie, how are you?" Wing said flatly. "Oh, by the way, I don't have my screen on because you've caught me as I was about to step into the shower, which means I'm as completely and unreservedly naked as God made me. What's your excuse? Did you forget whom you were calling?"

"For Christ's sake," Gold said again. "Who the hell answers the phone by saying, 'Yes?'"

"What do you want, Goldie?" he asked, the weariness in his voice unfeigned.

"That thing Stein's had under wraps in her lab is coming out of quarantine tomorrow. It's something new."

Wing waited for the other man to go on. "Is that it?" he said finally.

"Actually, it's someone new," Gold said. "Really new. Like nothing we've ever seen before."

"Don't tell me, another half-baked cyborg." Wing caught sight of himself in the big mirror over the sink and winced at his softening middle. He had never been overly anxious about getting older but ever since he had come to this complex with Hyacinth Stein, it

seemed as if everything even remotely youthful about himself was dropping away before his very eyes.

"I'm pretty sure it's not a cyborg. But if it is, it's definitely not half-baked. You know those grunts they brought in at the same time? Well, they're all staying in quarantine and, according to our grunts, they won't be leaving any time soon."

"Who'd you hear that from?" Wing asked.

"Someone who knows."

"They let grunts make calls from quarantine now? That's new."

"Our grunts aren't in quarantine—they had on protective gear." Gold paused. "Anyway, I don't think the quarantine's just for decontamination. I think it's as much for security as anything."

Wing finally gave in and reached around the shower door to shut off the water. "Your source tell you that, too?"

"Not in so many words. It seems all the soldiers in the detail were from the squadron stationed at Veronica Lake."

"Shit. No wonder they're not leaving. By this time next week they'll probably be stacked up like cordwood in the freezer and Stein'll have me doing their autopsies."

"I'm sure you're right," Gold said grudgingly. "Whatever cordwood is. Don't tell me, I'll just assume you know. But I got the very strong impression that they're really in quarantine because of what they know about the specimen they brought in."

"And what do you know?" asked Wing.

"Did you hear about what happened with that New Harvard professor and his class a few years back? Went on a field trip to the old homeworld and brought back something they couldn't handle?"

Wing tried to think. "I don't know," he said after a moment. "Maybe, maybe not. To tell you the truth, I haven't been paying a whole lot of attention lately."

"Well, you'd have had to be paying very close attention to know anything at all about it," said Gold with a grim, humorless laugh. "New Harvard and the military were really trying to hush it up. A bunch of people died; students, the professor, and an elite bunch of ex-grunts who had come along for the ride. Plus their ship, a

catamaran-class transport, blew up, but not before it took out a certain orbiting city."

Wing's laugh was incredulous. "Oh, come on, Goldie. I haven't been paying attention but even *I* know it was some terrorist coalition that destroyed Solaris."

"Yeah, yeah, some terrorist coalition. I can't remember the name, either, and since it was a suicide mission they're all too dead to answer questions. Very convenient, I'd say."

"More government conspiracies, Goldie?" Wing asked. "Isn't the one we're involved in enough for you?"

"It's not funny, Omar."

Wing sighed. "And?"

"And I'd like to know what I'm dealing with," Gold said impatiently. "I'd like to know what I'm locked in here with. Wouldn't you?"

"I already know what I'm locked in here with."

"Oh? And what might that be?"

"My conscience."

Ramirez Gold made a disgusted noise. "Hey, any time you can come up with a plan to blow the whistle on this whole operation in a way they can't suppress or discredit, I'm listening." Pause. "Uhhuh—thought so." He hung up.

And Goldie was one of the good guys, Wing thought as he put the shower on again. It was going to be another long day. Of course, since he had come here, there hadn't been any other kind.

I'd like to know what they locked us in here with.

He stood under the water and soaped himself up vigorously, as if he meant to scrub off the outer layer of his skin. No, you wouldn't like to know that, Goldie, he thought, you really wouldn't. You only think you'd like to know what you're locked in with because you're still buying into the myth that knowledge is power. You think that knowing the nature of the beast will make you better able to deal with it, maybe even let you figure out some way to defeat it or at least keep it at bay. But it won't. Knowing what you're locked in with will only give you more detailed information on what it is you can't escape. None of us really wants to know that.

The two beeps that pulled Supreme Allah out of his half-doze weren't a bit loud or startling. They came from the tablet on the bedside table. All of the tablet's audio signals and alerts had been painstakingly engineered by a team of experts to sound genteel, even discreet. Those qualities, however, did not make them welcome; Supreme Allah was grimacing as he stretched out one dark, wiry arm to pick the thin, silver rectangle up off the night stand and take a look at what the day held in store.

"Not good," he said, watching as text crawled upward from the bottom of the tablet's face. The thing was about the size of his hand, maybe just a little bit larger, and he kept the scroll-rate at the slowest possible speed. "Not even seven o'clock and already the news is bad." His rich, deep rumble of a voice was grave.

Next to him, Dr Fatima Haddad-O'Reilly pushed back her long, thick black hair and made herself comfortable on his left shoulder. "Is it anything that might involve laboratory personnel being forced to see Hyacinth Stein naked?" she asked sleepily.

"No." He brushed her forehead with his lips. "Woman, you are fortunate that you are in the arms of the one who understands your humor."

"Mmm. Don't I know it."

"Still, I and I fear for you."

"I know." Haddad-O'Reilly threw one arm across his naked chest and squeezed gently. "You and you worry about what'll happen when I say something like that in front of the wrong people."

"No," he said patiently, kissing her forehead again. "I and I worry about what will happen when the humor no longer protects you from the truth of life in this place."

"That's why I love you." Haddad-O'Reilly gave him another gentle squeeze. "So, what's the matter? Is there something even more ghastly than usual on the calendar for today?"

"The new specimen comes out of quarantine later today, Dr Stein wants half a dozen specimens prepped for neurosurgery to begin

right after the quarantine expires."

"Half a dozen?" Haddad-O'Reilly frowned and looked up at him. "That's a bit excessive, especially after her last interoffice epistle about not wasting resources." She raised herself up on one elbow and took the tablet from him, her frown deepening. "Am I reading this right? She wants to operate on one simultaneously with the new specimen while holding the other five in reserve?"

Supreme Allah regarded her solemnly. "See? Very bad."

"Yeah." Haddad-O'Reilly gave the tablet back to him and pushed herself up to a sitting position against the padded headboard. "Fire us up some breakfast, will you? Six inches at the very least."

"As you wish," he said. "But you know that you'll have to be cleansed before you leave this room. The sacrament won't help you after you go."

"No, but it'll help me while I'm still here," she said grimly.

Supreme Allah put the tablet back on the nightstand and reached into the drawer for a six-inch length of rope. "Anything else?" he asked her.

"Yes." She slid down next to him again and pressed the length of her body against his. "And plenty of it."

He smiled, albeit a little sadly. "As you say."

The one thing any repressive police state has going for it is its level of corruption; not only is it high, it's also highly sophisticated.

Fresh off the graveyard shift and sitting on the narrow bed in his closet of a room, Corporal Daniel V Numinen paused in the act of taking off his boots and smiled to himself. It had been years since he had seen the inside of a classroom but he could still hear those words as clearly as if his old history teacher had said them not two minutes before. He might not have gone so far as to say that the statement haunted him, but very little had ever stuck in his mind in quite the same way. Sometimes he suspected it was the real reason that he had joined the military, which was the police state in its purest form, either because he was curious as to how extensive the corruption

would be or simply to indulge his own less-than-noble inclinations to be corrupt in a controlled setting.

Those considerations were secondary to the main reason; that is, that his twin sister Linda had joined up. He and Linda had enlisted in the military together because that was the way they did things—together. They always had. Occasionally whatever it was they were planning to do would be preceded by a long, torturous discussion and once in a while, they might actually argue from positions that were poles apart. But inevitably they would reach a decision that they would both abide by, just the way the family had always insisted.

While Dan Numinen had questioned this from time to time, he had been careful never to express any of his qualms aloud, never tried to go against the order of life that had been established for the two of them as a single unit. Intuition warned against stirring up that kind of trouble for himself too soon, before he could formulate any sort of plan to deal with it. He had no regrets about playing it safe. In fact, he could say in complete honesty that he was glad he had done everything that had been expected of him. It only made him more confident in himself as he prepared to bring the whole thing to an end, and if there was one thing he really needed, it was to be confident in himself. This wasn't going to be easy, not by a long shot.

The uproar he would cause in the family when he announced that he would not be reenlisting with Linda was going to be unprecedented, at least in his lifetime. Now that he had committed himself to this course of action, he had to take every opportunity, no matter how small, to emphasize his status as a singleton. It wasn't enough just to think "I am one person," all alone over and over in the quiet of your head; you had to actively avoid inclusions of even the most mundane or superficial variety. Anyone could be alone, and with a little effort, almost anyone could feel alone. But the mark of a true singleton was feeling alone without actually having to be alone. Dan Numinen was working very hard on that part.

Having a room all to himself was a big help in that area, even if the room in question wasn't much bigger than he was. There was a lot to be said for this particular special duty assignment, even if the hours he drew were the absolute worst outside of anything other than

frontline combat. But even though it wasn't combat, it paid the same and goddamn, you couldn't get a sweeter deal than that.

Stripped to his shorts, he climbed into his skinny little bed and hit the blackout control on the nightstand. The room as it was didn't actually need a blackout control but it was there, given to him as another perk, and he was, by God, going to use it. Like the ancients always used to say, use it or lose it.

He shifted around on the mattress until he managed to position himself in the least uncomfortable arrangement of lumps and worn spots. Not even three months from now, he would be sleeping in a better bed not just in his own room but in his own home, his and nobody else's, thanks to Dr Hyacinth Stein. She had promised that to him as a reward for his good service to her. Even though everything he did for her or anyone else was supposed to be just part of his duties in general. Hell, he wasn't even supposed to get overtime pay for double shifts. But Dr Stein had just sprung this on him, insisting that she had the power to do whatever she wanted. Because, she had informed him in a final, no-nonsense tone, rank had its privileges.

That was hardly news to Dan Numinen, and every day in the military was a reminder about the privileges rank had, so he was in absolutely no danger of forgetting, either. But he had never once known anyone of rank to exercise any privileges for the purpose of making a grunt happy.

And to think that nobody else in the complex liked the lady, not even any of the other scientists. Dan Numinen found that really puzzling. Dr Stein wouldn't have been anybody's idea of a sex symbol and she sure wasn't all warm and friendly and cuddly but hell, she was a goddamned brainbox, not a game show host. Sure, she put people off, and she had really put him off back when he'd first met her. But then he'd come to realize that, what with being the director of the big project, she was just busy. Her head was really busy, all filled up with important and complicated thoughts all the time, so there wasn't a whole lot of room left for "please" and "thank you" or "have yourself a real good day." Some people were like that; they only had so much room for everything they had to know and there was nothing they could do about it.

He thought that scientists more than anyone else would have been used to people like that and so would have gotten along better with her. But it was the weirdest thing; they didn't. In fact, they all seemed to work at hating her, like she was their personal enemy.

It wasn't really any of his business but sometimes he was tempted to speak up, to try explaining to them that it really wasn't personal with Dr Stein. She wasn't really bad; she just wasn't very nice.

As she entered the cafeteria, Roz Trueheart was surprised to find Alonzo, Kray, and Powell, known collectively as the Sex Maniacs, already in line, waiting for breakfast service to begin. They had still been romping around in the gaming area when she had stumbled off to her quarters at a positively impossible hour of the morning after falling asleep in the movie theater. Some flatscreeners just had that effect on her; no matter how fascinated she was with the story or the characters, she would drop right off even if she hadn't been remotely tired. It made her wonder if there had been any people on Pre-Evacuation Earth with the same tendency.

She had read a lot about how the old Prevac television equipment could induce stupor; personally, she had a hard time believing that screens that were about the same size as a standard desktop display unit and situated an average distance of eight feet from the viewer could exert that kind of quasi-hypnotic power. It just wasn't big enough. In terms of perspective and relative size, it wasn't even as big as her phone held at arm's length.

Roz gave a sigh; it turned into a yawn against her will. Since she couldn't put a movie screen in her quarters, perhaps she ought to consider moving her bed into the cinema and see if that would allow her an uninterrupted night's sleep. As comfortable as the seats in the cinema were, they ultimately failed as beds.

Unless, of course, you were one of the Sex Maniacs, she thought, nodding hello at them as she picked up a tray and got into line. Then the universe was your bed.

"All tired out after last night?" Powell asked. It was one of the standard Sex Maniac greetings and it came with the trademark Sex Maniac smirk.

"Not as tired as you guys ought to be," she said, ignoring the fact that she had given them a straight line. It was almost impossible to say anything to the Sex Maniacs without giving them a straight line, at least if you were another intern. "You must have gamed all night."

Powell wiggled his glittery purple eyebrows at her. "And you must have been up all night yourself to know that."

"Is that a fact?" asked Alonzo, standing on tiptoe to peer at her over Powell's shoulder. "Roz was up all night?" Alonzo had dispensed with eyebrows altogether; somehow it gave his face a strangely innocent look, which Roz found a bit disturbing.

"I fell asleep watching a flatscreener in the cinema," she said, wondering why she was supplying them with material.

"Shoulda spent the night with us," said Alonzo. "You'd have stayed awake. You'd have had something to stay awake for."

"And then I would have a much better reason to be tired this morning," Roz said with an indifferent nod. "Sorry, I've already heard this one."

"And it's still true," Kray said.

"I'm sure." Roz stifled another yawn. "Is it just that I'm getting used to you guys, or are the jokes pretty tame this morning?"

"We're toning it down on purpose, completely as a courtesy to you," said Powell.

"Just because we can see how tired you are," Alonzo added.

"Considerate of you," Roz replied.

"Hey, we're the Sex Maniacs," Powell said, sounding slightly offended. "Considerate' is our middle name."

"Sex Considerate Maniacs?" Roz made a sceptical face. "I don't think it works."

"That's because you haven't tried it," said Kray. "Yet."

Breakfast service started then, sparing her any more of their lame sex humor. Sometimes, she wasn't sure which concept she found most difficult to believe: a) that there could possibly be some kind of overlying order or purpose governing the universe; b) that television

could ever have been an all-pervasive medium of influence on Pre-Evacuation Earth, or c) that any of the Sex Maniacs ever really got laid.

XY didn't knock before he opened the office door and stuck his head in.

"Cosi?"

The beautiful but rather unfortunately-named Dr Cosi Fan Tutte turned from the image she had been studying on the wall screen. Today she was wearing her white lab coat over a wildly multi-colored dashiki; another of her brilliant mismatches. XY couldn't help breaking into a delighted smile. She smiled back at him but he could see an undertone of anxiety in her broad dark brown face.

"You were asleep when I left," she said.

"I figured. You mind if I come in?"

Tutte made a quick, awkward welcoming motion with one hand.

"I looked for you in the dining room," XY said as he shut the door behind him.

"I skipped breakfast and just came straight here."

"That explains why nobody saw you."

Tutte blinked at him, her beautiful features uncertain now, almost fearful. "You aren't mad, are you?"

"Sure. But sadly, not to a degree that would convince the authorities they ought to section me out of this sorry setup as fast as possible." XY winked at her.

She laughed and her expression softened, although not enough to erase the worry in it. "That wasn't what I meant."

"I know." He jerked his chin at the screen. "So what's on the early show?"

"See for yourself. Something new and improved." Tutte beckoned him to join her in front of it and he did so. "I finally managed to tap into a live feed from Stein's console."

XY nodded, watching the ever-changing view of the large humanoid form strapped to the lab table. "Pretty minimal

surveillance and scanning."

"They caught Dr Stein completely off guard," said Tutte. "She didn't have time to equip the room properly before it was put under quarantine."

Now XY turned to look at her, astonished. "Are you talking about the same Hyacinth Stein that I know? Face like a homicidal bug, brain like a steel trap, heart of dry ice? Possibly a form of life but not life as we know it?"

Tutte's smile was both reluctant and fleeting. "I wish that *were* funny."

"You and me both," XY said, running a hand through his ragged black mane. On waking to discover that he was male today, he had given in to the sudden, rather mysterious urge to hack off several inches of hair as carelessly as possible. Hormones, he figured; it was as good an explanation as any. Switching back and forth between sexes had given him a profound appreciation of the role of biochemistry in human behavior. "So what is it, anyway? Some aspiring organ donor who made a spur-of-the-moment, middle-of-the-night bequest?"

"Aspiring organ donors don't usually need a dozen heavily-armed grunts to transport them. Or two weeks in quarantine," Tutte said and then shrugged. "Or maybe they do if they come from Three Mile Island."

"Three Mile Island? Are you sure about that?" XY asked her, glancing at the figure on the screen again.

"Oh, quite sure. Stein's not advertising it but she's not really hiding it, either. It's buried in the general data but if you can manage to stay awake long enough to read through all the blah-blah carefully, you'll find it."

"Maybe that explains the weird get-up," XY said thoughtfully. "Although it doesn't really account for the design. I don't think I've ever seen anything so bizarre. What the hell kind of a mask is that? It looks like it's supposed to be a simple filtration unit, but where do the filters go? And how do you change them without removing the whole mask? And what the hell is all that other stuff he's got on? It looks like somebody was trying to make a cross between an

environmental suit and fullbody armor and then just quit before the job was done."

"Good questions," Tutte said.

"All without answers, I suppose?" XY gave a short, humorless laugh.

"Oh, no, there are answers." Tutte pointed a remote at the screen and the display split into two panels. The original live feed shrank and moved to the left as a detailed graphic representation faded in on the right. "It's just that you might find the answers more than a little unbelievable." She stepped back as he moved closer to the screen.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her watching him; more than that, however, he could feel the intensity of her gaze. Her large brown eyes were actually a few shades lighter than her skin and the irises were unevenly pigmented so that at just the right angle, they seemed to twinkle with tiny gold sparks, something XY found both beautiful and unsettling.

Not to mention distracting, which he thought might be why the data he had been reading and rereading wasn't making any sense. Then he thought that perhaps the data was actually both garbled and incomplete. He sneaked a glance at Tutte; she was still watching him with an odd, expectant smile on her broad, perfect face.

"Well?" she said finally.

"Did you pull this directly out of Stein's files?" he asked her.

She shook her head.

"The tap only goes as deep as her buffers. If I tried to get in any farther than that, her system would register an intruder. However, in the interest of survival, I can leave the tap on her buffers permanently and she'll never know the difference."

XY chuckled.

"That's what I love about you. You're not just another brainy beauty, you're savvy, too."

Now she actually looked embarrassed.

"I know it's not right..."

"Nothing here is right," XY said. "You said it yourself, 'in the interest of survival.'"

"I know. I was just thinking that if we can do that to Stein, she can probably do it to us, and we wouldn't like it very much if she did."

"And what makes you so sure that she hasn't had us under full, continuous surveillance since we got here?"

Tutte's full lips curved down with revulsion. "I'm trying not to consider that possibility. A little denial can be good for the soul." She brightened a little. "And besides, I don't think she does have us under surveillance. No, I'm positive that she doesn't. Because she doesn't know about us."

"Or she just hasn't told us what she knows."

Tutte shook her head from side to side slowly and with conviction. "I can't imagine for one moment that Hyacinth Stein wouldn't tell us if she found out. I don't think she'd be able to stop herself."

XY hesitated, thinking it over. "You could well be right about that," he said after a bit. "But even if you are, this shit still doesn't make any sense."

"And what is it exactly that you don't understand?" Tutte asked, folding her slender arms.

"I didn't say I don't understand it. I said it doesn't make sense."

She was unperturbed. "All right, then what do you understand that doesn't make sense?"

"Oh, it's like that, is it?" He let out a long, put-upon sigh. "What this seems to be telling me is, the person on that table was rebuilt and restored by a full complement of medical nanos which made use of both organic and inorganic materials. If that is a person," XY added. "The organic material has all the characteristics of tissue taken from a human being but it has some extra non-human, even nonorganic qualities that are apparently original to it. Which is to say, not something the nanos did." He turned to Tutte, one eyebrow raised. "How am I doing so far?"

"Bang on target," she told him. "Are you planning to say at least a little bit about the dominance of the organic characteristics over the inorganic or the lethal level of nano mechanisms resident in the body?"

"No, I figured that could go without saying." XY winced and made an exasperated noise. "And you're really taking all this as fact? Don't

you see what's going on here? Stein obviously knows someone's tapping her data so she's rigged it to feed a fat load of bullshit to whomever's listening in."

Cosi Fan Tutte's sudden broad smile took him by surprise. "If this was coming out of her files, I'd have to say you were right. But it isn't. I tapped her buffers, remember? I'm getting this data at the same real-time moment she's getting it, while it's still in volatile memory, before her system can encrypt it, store it, or even format it.

"Stein doesn't have a system sophisticated enough to generate decoy data in the buffers," Tutte went on. "By her own request. Too slow and too expensive, unquote. It would never occur to her that she might need something like that for the sake of security, which is how I can get away with this undetected. Hyacinth Stein may be the evil genius in residence but she's got her blind spots just like anyone else."

"Please don't talk like that, Cosi. You're making her sound almost human." XY gave an elaborate shudder. "I don't think I care for that idea very much."

"To be human is to be an imperfect vessel," Tutte reminded him.

"There's imperfect and then there's mutant." He frowned at the screen. "I'm sorry, my love, but I don't believe any of the data you have onscreen is real. Either it's garbled or Stein actually did take the trouble to have her lab hardware programmed to output decoy data to keep any eavesdroppers busy while she collects the real data some other way."

Tutte didn't say anything.

"You have to admit that's a possibility, even if it's a very small one." XY prodded.

"You know how I hate it when I have to do something. Like if everything not forbidden were compulsory."

XY winced. "What a ghastly thought."

"I know."

"But ghastly as it may be, it's still not real." He gestured at the screen.

"However, you do have to admit there's a possibility that it is," she said lightly. "Even if it's a very small one. Sorry, but there are some

things you have to do, too, you know."

God, but Cosi Fan Tutte was so fucking insipid. If the bug he had planted hadn't failed at that point, Dr Gunnar Gottmund thought, he would have shut it off anyway. All that woman ever seemed to do was agonize. She agonized over everything: Hyacinth Stein's ethics (or lack of them), the possible existence of a supreme being, what to eat for lunch. It didn't make any difference. Whatever she happened to be focused on was grounds for a bout of brow-furrowing, hand-wringing, mealy-mouthed agonizing.

He had really thought in the beginning that he was onto something when he had uncovered the secret relationship between Tutte and the ambisexual. Not that he would have cared what happened between some middle-aged (ie, over thirty) woman and an actively cycling morf, except that both of them had gone to such great pains to hide it. He hadn't had the faintest idea why they felt the need to do such a thing and he still didn't. But he was less interested in their motives than he was with their actions. It was enough to know what they were so determined to keep hidden; knowing people's secrets was often very useful in obtaining a certain amount of personal leverage when times turned *parlous*, as his dear departed mother had said, and motive almost never made a bit of difference one way or the other.

And yeah, sure, there was no question that leverage was a damned good thing, especially in a place like this. Gunnar Gottmund knew a lot about places like this; he had been in quite a few of them over the course of his career. He had started out in the military, a soldier in name only, following the track they had set out for him, always accepting whatever post he was given. Some of those posts had been about as desirable as Hyacinth Stein but it had all paid off. Eventually, they had stopped sending him to mop floors and wash test tubes in places like the ass end of Lower Ass End and began putting him on more important projects with higher security, moving him in toward the serious action.

Until he had finally landed here, working on the super soldier project with Hyacinth Stein, the undisputed Bitch-Queen of serious R and D. Word was, the military had gotten down on its collective battle-scarred knees and begged her to be their very own exclusive Bitch-Queen. Which had to mean this project wasn't just a big one, or even a Big One. This was *The* Big One. You couldn't beat that for status. Not to mention money; when he finished up here, he'd never have to work again if he didn't want to. If he could have gotten laid more often, it would have been perfect.

He got up from his desk, stretched hugely, and headed for the shower, stripping off his clothes and dropping them as he went.

ELEVEN

"So where's the mutant monster or whatever it is now?" asked the new intern.

There was an extended moment of silence as all the other interns at the table traded glances. Finally Zelda Yamaguchi said, "She's in her office, drooling over whoever or whatever she's got quarantined in the lab next door."

As it was 7:30 in the morning, the reaction from everyone else was rather subdued. A couple of people mustered enough energy to clap, somebody actually whistled, and a few of the interns even managed to laugh while they yawned or vice versa. Meanwhile, the new one sat looking puzzled and maybe even a little bit hurt at not being in on the joke.

Zelda felt a mixture of sympathy and mild annoyance for her as she acknowledged the sluggish applause with a lazy, mock-regal wave. It was never easy to be the new kid, no matter where you were. Even the first day in heaven was probably anything but, and this place was about as far from heaven as you could get without actually bursting into flames.

But that made it only more imperative to ditch the displays of sensitivity, no matter who you were with, whether it was a breakfast table full of coworkers or your closest, oldest friend, or even no one at all. Especially the latter, you had to be extra careful when there was no one to watch your back.

"Sorry, but you walked right into that one," Zelda told her, hoping she sounded kind rather than callous. "There are straight lines and then there are straight lines, but that one was the straight line from God."

The other woman, Lynne Something-or-other, looked around uncertainly as she fidgeted with the blood-orange she had been peeling. "I get the very definite feeling you're not saying I have some kind of special connection to the divine."

"Oh, but maybe you do," said Fredo Walewski. "No matter what anyone says. Or doesn't say." He turned to Zelda with an expression

on his face that said, Go easy on this one for a change, will ya?

I will if you will, Zelda told him silently, gazing back at him through half-closed eyes. Fredo meant well; he always meant well and he looked even better. Tall, well-built, with thick, blue-black hair and smoky gray eyes, he was clever and friendly and generally likeable. It was the rare female intern (usually female, although there had been a few men as well) who didn't develop a crush on him shortly after getting acquainted with him. Unfortunately, Fredo never seemed to pick up on it and eventually, the smitten party would make a move to take friendship to the next level.

That was always the point at which they would discover that Fredo, for whatever reason, just wasn't available in that way. Only then would it occur to them that Fredo's willingness to be such a good listener actually meant that all those deep meaningful conversations had been one-sided and that most of what they thought they knew about him was predominantly a matter of personal conjecture based on a combination of vague impressions and wishful thinking.

It had occurred to her that she would not have been half so amused if she had had the bad luck to be one of those poor souls who had succumbed to Fredo's inadvertent charms. Like Willona, sitting on his left and pretending she wasn't nursing the futile hope that Fredo would suddenly realize he was actually in love with her after all. Or Ondine, who wasn't the first female to find the perfect antidote to unrequited lust in Gunnar Gottmund's bed.

In fact, Zelda had a feeling that Fredo Walewski could take some responsibility, at least in an indirect way, for a certain percentage of Dr Gottmund's healthy and active sex life. She had no idea whether or not this had ever occurred to Dr Gottmund himself; most likely it hadn't and, judging from what she had heard about him, it wouldn't. There seemed to be plenty of women who had fallen madly in bed with him without tripping over Fredo Walewski first. Personally, she was relieved not to be one of them.

She did think from time to time, however, that she very well might have had a couple of things to regret in that area if she hadn't been so wrapped up in the ugly truth of what she had found herself in after coming to the complex to work with Dr Stein. She was still

preoccupied, although the urgency she had felt initially had damped down to a steady state of disillusion, rancor, and defeat.

All told, she was not in the frame of mind that would have predisposed her to falling in either love or lust. Perhaps Fredo was suffering from the same ailment; she found that perfectly understandable. It didn't seem to make any difference, however; people continued to be drawn to him. Pheromones, maybe? Or was there something darker at work? Like, say, some kind of secret mind control experiment that Dr Stein was running without anyone else's knowledge.

Oh, yeah, that was a good one, Zelda thought sourly. That could happen. While she was at it, she could also consider voodoo or some kind of gypsy love spell.

Abruptly the image of an old Earth I artifact appeared in her mind, or, to be more precise, a replica of an old homeworld artifact. Her father had given it to her for her thirteenth birthday, and it had made her giggle every time she looked at it. It was a piece of elaborately embroidered cloth called a cross-stitch sampler in an ersatz-antique frame, but instead of the typical Pre-Evacuation Earth Era slogans like BLESS THIS HOUSE or A PENNY SAVED IS A PENNY EARNED, it read, GET A GRIP, KID!

Get a grip, indeed. It still made her giggle, albeit these days silently more often than not, and it was still some of the best advice she'd ever received. Perhaps it was because she'd actually made a real effort to follow it that she wasn't burdened with some dumb-ass and ultimately futile yearning for Fredo or anyone else.

She gave herself pats on the back regularly for being sensible, even shrewd, in the way she governed her personal life (or lack of it), telling herself that what she felt was relief, and only relief. Not disappointment. Certainly not disappointment, uhuh, and most definitely not boredom, not in the least. For God's sake, what was she, a fucking drama queen? When it came to the grand scheme of things—and that included both the grand scheme that concerned the fate of the universe and the not-so-grand scheme that had to do solely with the fate of Zelda Yamaguchi—it was that much less *tsuris* she had to deal with. She did occasionally think that it was too bad

that she hadn't developed some kind of yen for Fredo, as that might have caused the military to transfer her elsewhere at the speed of light, or maybe they would even have fired her outright.

Correction: freed her. That would have been the perfect outcome, which was why it could never have happened. The military was more likely to have transferred Fredo instead, which would have left her trapped in the complex, still working with Dr Stein on the project while she nursed a broken heart. But instead of getting over Fredo with the passage of time, she would have become increasingly obsessed with him until one day she woke up to find herself as twisted and warped and generally fucked up as her erstwhile idol and paragon, Hyacinth Stein.

So, there it was. When she thought her situation through with a bit more care, it became obvious that the hell she was in was not the worst. She didn't consider that much of a consolation, though, and dreaded the day when she did.

Her mind suddenly played back the last few thoughts and she had to stick a piece of wholegrain toast in her mouth to keep from laughing out loud at herself. Christ, but she was getting to be such a fucking drama queen.

If only Zelda would just take a break from being so unrelentingly hard all the time, Fredo thought, giving her a furtive glance while he drank his coffee. He had picked up a fruit bowl in the cafeteria but his appetite had deserted him long before he had even sat down at the table in the interns' lounge. Perhaps because there had already been half a dozen people there including the Sex Maniacs and none of them had left an empty seat next to Zelda.

Goddamned Sex Maniacs; as usual, the three of them were sniggering and nudging each other while they ate from their combined plates indiscriminately. If only they could have discovered the joys of sharing breakfast in bed, Fredo thought sulkily as he took a seat next to Roz Trueheart. Roz had given him a commiserating look. She referred to them as the Three Disgraces, indisputable proof

that three men completely devoid of taste or class could always charm someone into lowering their values and standards, right along with their defenses. Not to mention their clothes.

Of course, he could have simply gotten up a little earlier. That way he might have had a chance to eat most of his breakfast before the Sex Maniacs came in and put him off his food.

Or he could have tried behaving like an adult rather than an infatuated twelve year-old and actually talked to Zelda about how he felt. How long had he been telling himself to do that? Ever since they had come here, yes. If he were going to be absolutely honest about it, since the day they had met. What the hell was stopping him?

Simple answers to that he had in abundance: Zelda scared him; he didn't want to ruin their friendship, such as it was; she was both completely wrapped up in her work and disillusioned by it; the rest of the interns would tease them unmercifully; if the military got wind of something going on, they would transfer him off the planet.

And those were only the simple answers he could conjure up without making any kind of effort at all. If he took time to put some real thought into it, he could probably work up a set of excuses to cover every day of the year.

Better he should try to work up an appetite instead, he thought as he gazed down at the bowl of fruit on the table, just for the sake of giving himself something else to think about. Contemplate the true essence of hydroponic pear-melons and vineapples. They sure worked miracles over there in the Agriculture and Cultivation Department, no doubt about it. And hey, was that a snow cherry? He pushed it around with a spoon for a few seconds and then drank some more coffee.

The new intern seemed pretty nice. Kind of edgy and nervous, but he put that down to her being new. Lynne... Somebody. Only her first name was stamped in clear black print over the breast pocket on the left side of her lab coat. Interns were kept strictly on a first-name basis here at the complex so that the constant reinforcement of their status as second-class citizen by the scientists and other elite members of the hierarchy would sound friendly. They were also routinely referred to as boys and girls for the same reason, or so

Fredo figured. He wondered if the new girl had any idea of what she had gotten herself into.

Did she know what had happened to LeBlanc Tousignant, the intern she was replacing? If so, she knew a hell of a lot more than the rest of them. Highly unlikely that she did, however, as the interns weren't supposed to know anything of real consequence. Of course, that didn't mean none of them did.

In fact, Fredo had had his suspicions about LeBlanc several weeks before the guy had failed to turn up at breakfast with his usual healthy appetite and overloaded tray. In the beginning, the husky redhead had seemed no different from the rest of them; aside from his build, anyway. He'd looked more like a career combat grunt than a student doing lab tech duty. But Zelda had managed to get a look at his background data and the guy had checked out as a genuine lab rat who just happened to be body-proud.

You didn't find too many of those. Fredo had never met one himself until he had come to the complex. Early on the morning of his second day, he had encountered Dr Gunnar Gottmund on his way to the gym. The man had been wearing a pair of high-tech athletic shoes, a towel over one shoulder, and, except for a look of mild surprise at seeing another person moving around at the same early hour, nothing else.

The only thing Gottmund hadn't showed was anything in the way of embarrassment or reticence. He made no attempt to cover himself, not even turning away although it seemed to Fredo less like deliberate exhibitionism than it did an unselfconscious absence of the nudity taboo. Completely unruffled, Gottmund had frowned slightly and said,

"Freddy, isn't it?" as if they had met while standing in the queue for breakfast in the cafeteria.

Fredo had had to clear his throat before he could answer. "Actually, it's Fredo, Dr Gottmund."

The man nodded and moved past him, not hurrying but moving quickly enough that Fredo had barely had time to step aside and let him by. He had been unable to stop himself from stealing a quick glance at Gottmund's retreating back (and backside); Gottmund

himself had apparently had no urge to do likewise, to Fredo's intense relief.

He had stopped getting up quite so early after that and so far had managed to avoid a repeat of the incident. Or, rather, non-incident, seeing how Dr Gottmund behaved no differently toward him afterwards. He certainly never referred to it even in the most oblique way, which was just fine with Fredo. Still, he had decided it was better not to risk any more early morning encounters with nude scientists.

After LeBlanc's arrival he had worried briefly about having a second nude exerciser to dodge but as it turned out, LeBlanc was given to conventional notions of modesty. Fredo wondered if the guy had ever had an encounter of his own with Gottmund, maybe in the gym. But he had never gotten around to asking before LeBlanc's abrupt and unexpected departure.

Which brought him back to the original question: what had happened to LeBlanc Tousignant? Fredo had asked their supervisor; Supreme Allah initially claimed to have no idea. Later on, he switched to management's party line about non-disclosure under the Inviolable Privacy Act, but Fredo was almost a hundred percent certain that he still didn't know and couldn't find out.

Even Zelda's sources had run dry. The best she had been able to come up with were speculative rumors: LeBlanc had been exposed to some toxin and was currently rotting away in a sub-oceanic vault; he had been executed for espionage and treason; he was currently naked, drugged and chained to Hyacinth Stein's bed.

"Fredo?"

Starting a little, he looked up to see Zelda watching him with a slight frown. "What?" he asked.

"What, yourself. You had a rather weird look on your face." She smiled with half her mouth. "Like you'd found something untoward crawling around in your breakfast."

"Not mine," he said quickly and nudged Roz Trueheart who was sitting on his right. "Roz's. She's back on crustaceans again."

Roz used her fork to spear something with tentacles and shook it at him. "Peasant," she jeered good-naturedly.

"Bottom feeder," he retorted.

"I keep telling you, Fredo, everybody's got to eat somewhere. There's nothing wrong with bottom feeders."

"Just as long as they don't come from Veronica Lake," said the new intern.

Abruptly everyone stopped talking and turned to look at her. Even the Sex Maniacs stopped fooling around. She shifted in her seat uneasily, her gaze flitting from one person to another. "I didn't get my copy of the new intern's guide yet," she said after a bit. "But maybe someone will loan me theirs so I can read the chapter on things not to talk about."

Two seats to Fredo's left, Devon O sat up a little straighter and cleared his throat. "You know what happened at Veronica Lake?"

"Well..." The new intern looked around again. "Yes."

"Great." Several long black and gold braids snaked over Devon's shoulder as he leaned forward. "So tell the rest of us; what happened?"

Lynne Whoever-She-Was crossed her arms protectively over her chest and tried a smile on him. Fredo gave her top marks for that. She gave a good smile, that was for sure. And since he was pretty sure she was forcing it, it was even more worthy of acclaim. He looked at her more closely, seeing her properly for the first time. Hmm, he thought. Not bad. Mouth might be a little wide, forehead a bit too high. But that was usually a sign of brains, and brains were no problem to Fredo. Women who weren't brainy were just boring. He watched Lynne's mouth as she toned down the smile and replied to Devon.

"To be honest, I don't know anything that no one else knows," she said. "Some kind of malfunction in the power station, which caused a fire that spread to the nearby woods. They burned to the ground and the whole area, including the lake, got contaminated." She shrugged one shoulder awkwardly. "That's the only story *I* know."

"Interesting," said Zelda, also leaning forward and planting both elbows on the table. "Because those of us who were here at the time heard that anti-nuke demonstrators sabotaged the place with the

help of a sympathetic journalist who used forged credentials to get inside."

"Really." Lynne Whoever raised her eyebrows with interest that Fredo thought was a bit too showy. Still, nice eyebrows, he thought. And she has managed to lighten them to same tone as her hair. This woman had obviously decided that blondes had more fun. He wondered idly what color her hair was naturally. Must be fairly light, judging by her pale skin tone. She was still talking.

"Did they ever catch this journalist?"

"Nope," said Devon.

"Really," the new intern said again, turning to look at him. "Do they even know who she was?"

Zelda's face lit up suddenly with a mischievous smile. "And who said it was a 'she'?"

Fredo caught a fleeting look of panic on the woman's face; then she covered it with a sheepish grin. "God, I am such a sexist," she said. "I just automatically say she or her unless someone specifically tells me otherwise."

"Really," Devon said, mimicking her tone perfectly. "Now, me, I'm what they call a grammar anarchist. I use 'they' and 'them' as singular indefinite pronouns in deliberate defiance of all those years the educational system tried to beat the habit out of me."

"Ah, a cultural subversive. Lucky neither of us has a pedantic editor looking over everything with a fine toothcomb, or, God forbid, a knowledge of Latin grammar." Lynne Whoever turned back to him and chuckled politely, although Fredo could see there was no mirth in her gaze. "You're a man after my own heart. "Who's in charge; you, me, or the word? I say, none of the above.' Isn't that how the saying goes?"

"Something like that." Devon focused his attention on his breakfast in a way that suggested he had never seen anything else even half as fascinating.

"So, Lynne, tell us the truth," Fredo piped up, hoping his attempt to be casual and friendly didn't sound as forced to everyone else as it did to him. "Just how did you manage to get someone so mad at you they shipped you off to this outfit?"

Instead of smiling back at him, the intern made a pained face. "Oh, my. I didn't realize that the way to get this assignment was to get someone mad at you." She flicked a glance around the table again, essaying another smile. "Just judging from the way things have been going, I was beginning to think it was actually the other way around, that I must have been sent here to get someone mad."

Fredo gave a short laugh. "Yeah, I can see how easy it would be for you to get that idea." He sent Zelda a significant sideways look.

She astonished him by throwing up both hands in obvious disgust. "Oh my God, you're starting already!" Her chair scraped harshly on the floor as she pushed back from the table and stood up, grabbing her tray. "Here I was giving you the benefit of the doubt, telling myself you couldn't possibly be doing it on purpose."

Fredo stared at her open-mouthed as she strode over to the swinging door and kicked it open. He had a glimpse of a very startled Supreme Allah who had apparently just missed being mashed flat against the wall before the door swung back the other way.

Supreme Allah stepped into the room and caught the edge of the door with two strong hands, pausing to look around questioningly. Fredo felt Roz's elbow dig into his ribs.

"Whatever it is, it's Fredo's fault," she said, winking at him.

Supreme Allah turned to him with an expectant air and Fredo suddenly found himself floundering wordlessly. After a moment, he spread his hands helplessly and shrugged.

"It's all good if Jah wills it," Supreme Allah said with a dismissive wave and turned to Lynne Whoever. "Come now, more to show you this morning."

A faint alarm bell went off in Fredo's mind as he watched the man usher the new intern out of the lounge. Three days was the standard orientation period; Lynne Whoever was now two days past that and as far as anyone knew she still hadn't been given a definite assignment. Supreme Allah had done the same thing yesterday, pulled her out of the lounge before the official start of the day shift. That was the last anyone had seen of either one of them until late that night, when Fredo had spotted her just by chance buying a reconstituted meal bar from one of the vending machines in the

hallway outside the cafeteria. She hadn't appeared guarded or concerned that he had seen her; they had nodded a silent greeting to each other and then she had headed back toward the women's dorm area before he could come up with a conversation opener.

Tonight, he decided to make a point of looking for her so he could ask right out what was going on with her and Supreme Allah. Maybe it was just plain old hot sex; after all, the Sex Maniacs weren't the only ones getting laid around here, just the only ones that everybody else knew about. Or maybe it wasn't that at all; maybe it was something boring, like they had gone to the same school or lived in the same neighborhood. Whatever it was, important or not, he was going to find out. Because maybe if he could tell Zelda something she didn't know, she would stop treating him like something she had scraped off the bottom of her shoe.

And even if she didn't, what the hell. He'd seen all the movies and played all the games and they weren't getting any new ones till next week. He needed something different to think about.

TWELVE

"Is there some reason why you aren't just remixing genetic material in the lab?" Lynne asked Dr Gold as they stepped into the elevator. Her question came not out of any genuine curiosity on her part but as a way of making conversation with the man about anything, thus avoiding a thunderingly uncomfortable silence.

There was no guarantee it would work. She had not expected any of the scientists she had met over the last few days to display the congenial behavior of a politician running for office, but Ramirez Gold was in a class by himself, in that he had the saddest face she had ever seen on any human being.

There was nothing overly physical about it: his eyes didn't droop, there were no lines around his mouth or, for that matter, just about anywhere else on his face. Nor did he walk around with his head down or his shoulders slumped. Nonetheless, there was something about him: the look in his eyes, the set of his mouth, or perhaps some element that was completely subliminal. Whatever it was, it made him the portrait of melancholy. And that melancholy seemed out of place here in the research complex. Fear, maybe; uncertainty, definitely. But melancholy? Not when everyone was trying so hard to be a good team player. She got the impression that they all tried so hard to do that because something really, really bad happened to people who got kicked off the team. And something far worse than an early bath.

"You know, I had the very same thought," Gold said finally, after some long and sad contemplation of Lynne's question. Then he actually smiled at her. But sadly, as if she had something to do with a regret he was particularly fond of.

Lynne found herself wondering where his melancholy would have *not* been out of place. Perhaps in the company of a bunch of romantic poets dying of consumption on Earth I, back in the nineteenth century, before they had a cure for TB or even knew what it was. But that was another story and she found herself feeling it would be a sad one. My God, she thought. His melancholy is

infectious. Shake yourself out of it, Ms Intrepid Undercover Reporter.

She realized that there was a silence hanging in the air, and she came out of her sad feelings and blinked at Gold.

"Oh. You did?"

"The very first day I was here. I asked Dr Stein why she didn't just have material shipped in from donor banks. It seemed to me that it would save an enormous amount of time and trouble. Not to mention space."

"I see. And, uh..." she cleared her throat to cover a nervous laugh. "What did Dr Stein say her reason was?"

Gold's sigh suggested he was sorry he had to be the one to tell her this. "She said that without the originals themselves, there were no reliable control specimens." He turned his gaze to the numbers lighting up with maddening slowness on the panel above the door.

Lynne gave up and did the same, wondering for the umpteenth time why a project like this, with state-of-the-art equipment and virtually unlimited funding, would have elevators that moved only slightly faster than grass grew. Perhaps even the elevators were affected by Gold's melancholy. And a sad elevator was not going to be in a big hurry to get anywhere.

She caught herself descending into fantasy, and pulled herself back to reality. Gold's sad reality. Stein's secretive and dangerous reality. Lynne's own scary and isolated reality.

She considered asking Gold about the elevators; no doubt Dr Stein had a very good reason for that, too.

"She also pointed out that people are not produced from genetic material remixed laboratories," Gold added suddenly, turning back to her again. "Nor do they live their lives under glass. We have to factor in nurture and environment, among other things. She is right, of course, about the human organism being multi-dimensional. I just hope it doesn't turn out that she's secretly an unrepentant disciple of Lysenko." That sad smile again. "What a scandal, eh?"

Lynne smiled back and made a polite murmur of agreement while she tried desperately to remember who or what Lysenko was. She

still hadn't figured it out when the elevator finally slid to a stop and the doors opened again.

"This way," Gold said, one hand briefly cupping her elbow as he directed her to the left. The mannerism reminded her of Timothy Olsen, although Gold had to be much younger. Maybe they knew each other. It wasn't impossible. And now that she had made the association, she was starting to notice a couple of other mannerisms that reminded her a little of Olsen. She was going to have to figure some way that she could bring up Timothy Olsen's name and see how he reacted to it.

At the very least, asking Gold about the former power plant project director might give her some glimmer of information about what had happened to him. She didn't know if he had survived the massacre at the plant, or the radiation, or the security clamp-down.

"You haven't been to the clinic yet, have you?" Gold asked her as they approached an airlock-style door at the end of the hallway.

"No, I haven't. I mean, I noticed it on the orientation map. I figured it was part of on-site medical care for the staff."

"Well, it isn't."

The unexpectedly sharp tone in his voice made Lynne look over at him quickly.

"This is an area of the project deliberately kept secret from everyone except the staff and a few people at the very highest level of military command. And while it's no secret from anyone in the installation, Dr Stein takes a very dim view of interns making it a subject for discussion."

"Understood," Lynne said. "Thanks for the heads-up."

"That's no joke," Gold added, coming to a stop some ten feet away from the entrance to the clinic. "There is no privacy here. I'm sure they told you that more than once when you came in. Be more than careful about that. Be aware that it is literally true."

"All right," Lynne replied, trying not to squirm with uneasiness. She was already keeping so many secrets, living a lie here, undercover in the research complex, that one more secret was hardly going to make a difference. There seemed to be so many secrets, and differing levels of access, that it was almost impossible to know who

knew what. Or why. But then, that atmosphere of barely controlled paranoia probably suited Hyacinth Stein. It would be a good way of keeping everyone on their toes and safely under control. No chance of a bunch of plotters getting together if no one trusted anyone else with their secrets.

"Why I mention this," he glanced at the door, "is because the first visit to the clinic can be disturbing. So much so, for some people, that they feel the need to talk about it. Don't be one of them."

The question came out of her involuntarily as she followed him the rest of the way down the hall. "Is there an acceptable alternative?"

"Absolutely." He stopped in front of the door and pressed a small lighted panel on the metal frame. "Technically, it's supposed to be strictly for the military and only in situations of extreme stress or actual combat. But the grunts have been sharing their supply of LRO with the rest of us for some time now."

"LRO?" asked Lynne.

"Little Red Ones." There was a brief, airy sound as the door unsealed and opened an inch. "I'm sure they'll give you a dose here if you ask."

Lynne had barely had time to digest this information before Gold was herding her through the airlock and into what seemed to be a stockroom for surplus canned goods.

"Height and weight?" he said.

She looked around at the floor-to-ceiling shelves in amazement. "Whose?" she asked, mystified. "You mean mine?"

"Yes, please." There was only a hint of impatience in his tone.

"Sorry." Lynne felt a rush of heat to her face as she told him. He plucked a can off a lower shelf behind him and tossed it to her. Her attempt at an easy, one-handed catch turned into a brief juggling act during which she barely managed not to hurl the can across the room.

"The booth'll measure you more precisely," Gold said, "but nowhere near as quickly, and the results are the same."

FULL-BODY CONDOM, said the block letters on the can. Just below that, in smaller letters, Booth Use Only; Follow Directions;

External Use Only Do NOT Powder—If Skin Is Sensitive, Use FULL-BODY CONDOM FSS* *For Sensitive Skin.

"Ever been sprayed?" asked Gold, sounding almost amused now.

She looked up from the can.

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Nothing to it. Just follow the directions in the booth." He shoed her through a door in the corner that led to what looked like a shower room with completely enclosed stalls.

Five minutes later, the opposite side of the booth swung open and she stepped out into a narrow hallway. The panel shut automatically behind her and suddenly she was face to face with her own reflection in a full-length mirror on the back.

Professor Morse's mild warning that she might find herself out of her depth came back to her but she decided that it didn't really apply. This had nothing to do with how many science courses she had on her transcript. She was almost tempted to think that this might actually be a practical joke, just a little hazing ritual for the new girl. From the neck up, her head was encased in a transparent, somewhat flexible bowl; from the neck down, she wore only a thong and what was essentially a thick coating of spray paint that was as comfortable as it was embarrassing. Full-body condom. She shook her head. Apparently science was a lot kinkier than most people suspected.

The narrow hall took her to a foyer and another airlock. It unsealed as soon as she stood on the small mat in front of it and she went through to find Dr Gold waiting for her in the foyer on the other side, similarly attired in dark blue. So much for the idea of it being a practical joke, she thought, feeling hideously self-conscious. Maybe it was really Dr Stein's way of persuading people that they didn't want to talk about the clinic. She certainly didn't want to. She didn't want to talk, period; not now, anyway, and especially not to Ramirez Gold. Nor did she want Dr Gold to say anything to her, especially if it had something to do with how they were dressed. Even if it was just something harmless, like why the colors were different. Please, please, please don't talk about this, she pleaded silently. Don't even say something nice and do not, under any circumstances, try to comfort me.

As if he caught the flavor of her thoughts, the man only gave her a polite nod and motioned for her to follow as he opened the door to the clinic.

Lynne's eyes widened; the clinic was a hospital or a hospital ward, anyway. There looked to be at least two dozen beds and all of them were occupied by patients who were apparently asleep; very, very deeply asleep, since they were all utterly motionless.

"Dr Gold?"

Lynne caught her breath at the sight of the rather statuesque woman in white spray paint standing in front of a wall of monitors and read-outs she had been scanning. She was easily one of the most beautiful women Lynne had ever seen, not just by virtue of her lovely, exotic face or her generous, perfectly proportioned body but also in the way she carried herself. If she could get the hang of that, Lynne thought, trying not to look too awestruck, she probably could have worn spray paint to work and Waxie Anschutz wouldn't have said a word about it. Work, hell; she could have worn spray-paint to Three Mile Island and had everyone genuflecting.

Except for that creature. It would have killed her anyway.

Something of her thoughts must have shown on her face because the woman motioned to someone and suddenly there was a man in white spray paint applying a round patch to her left bicep. The effects kicked in immediately, telling Lynne that it was a heftier dose of the same drug Rena Sofira had given her. Nonetheless, she stepped back sharply, looking from him to the woman and then to Ramirez Gold.

"Lynne, it's nothing to wor—"Gold started.

"I know what it is," Lynne told him. "Next time, ask me. Or at least warn me."

Gold made a vague gesture that didn't promise anything one way or another and introduced the woman somewhat belatedly as Dr Haddad-O'Reilly.

"Lynne, isn't it?" Haddad-O'Reilly gave her a smile that could only have been described as relentlessly professional. "I beg your pardon. I took the liberty of having the nurse medicate you purely out of concern. You're so new. You've only been here—how long? Two days?"

"Three," Lynne said, wishing she didn't sound so small all of a sudden. She felt like a child again, on those excruciating occasions when her mother would ask her to sing for friends visiting them. Not that she had a bad voice, in fact she had a darned good voice, but it was just so embarrassing to be held up in front of people as an object of attention.

The woman nodded knowingly. "Not even a week. This place as a whole takes some getting used to and the clinic can be somewhat unsettling."

"Dr Gold filled me in on that."

"Dr Gold is a thorough and conscientious man who knows whereof he speaks." Haddad-O'Reilly gave him a look of genuine fondness.

"Do you always have so many patients here?" Lynne asked conversationally, turning to look at the beds for a moment. When she turned back, she was surprised (and a little pleased) to see that the expression on the woman's exotic and beautiful face had lost some of its certainty.

"It varies," she told Lynne in a cool and slightly lofty tone. "This is not officially a military hospital and very few members of the military are even aware of its existence. As I am sure Dr Gold has also already told you."

Lynne nodded. She had to force herself to breath evenly and normally: she felt both scared and excited, as if on the verge of some revelation. Perhaps she was finally going to get some idea of what was really going on in this research project.

"For the military personnel who come here, however, this is the last stop," Haddad-O'Reilly went on. "We do what we can to provide the very best and most advanced medical care. Virtually all of it is experimental, unproven, sometimes even improvised and, needless to say, we don't always see the desired results."

"I suppose if this were my last stop, I would volunteer, too," Lynne said, looking around again.

"Actually, you wouldn't have to," said Haddad-O'Reilly. "If you're in the military, you're automatically a volunteer."

Lynne's eyebrows went up. "For this?"

"For everything," the nurse put in, startling her. She had forgotten he was there.

"Right now, they've volunteered to donate material to the cloning lab," Gold said smoothly. "So if someone will bring out the tissue-sampler, Lynne and I can get started."

"Right away, Dr Gold." The nurse hurried toward the far end of the ward, his feet making little *squeak—squeak—squeak* noises on the highly polished floor.

As it turned out, the tissue-sampler Dr Gold had been referring to was not the standard assortment of specialized syringes and sterile receptacles with settings to regulate temperature and pH all laid out on a custom-built cart, but a self-contained technological marvel that Professor Morse had once assured her would not exist for at least another decade. So much for free exchange of academic knowledge and research, Lynne thought. If someone as well connected and respected in his field is not aware of this, then no one out there is. The knowledge, the technology, were trapped in here as surely as the airlocks trapped anything that might want to float out in the air.

The tissue-sampler was shaped exactly like one of those really old Pre-Evacuation dollhouses she had seen in the Museum of Eternal Childhood at New Harvard. Not one of the late-twentieth century artifacts with a brand name, but one of the really, really old ones made out of metal or wood with a gabled roof. The top of the tissue-sampler's exterior housing came to the same kind of point and once Lynne had made the association, it stuck there in her mind, refusing to go away. Some toy. On the other hand, if Professor Morse could have seen this, Lynne thought with some amusement, he probably would have reacted to it very much like a ten year-old confronted with the toy of his dreams. Not that there was any chance of that: Morse and everyone else outside of this complex were out of the loop, way out.

It was unlikely that he would have made the same association with the shape; he would have been captivated by the gathering tool, a

deceptively simple-looking instrument on the end of an ordinary retractable cable. When not in use, the tool took the shape of a flattened metal teaspoon. Applied to certain areas of the human body, however, and it would detect certain cells as specified. If a sample were requested, nanos would realign the tool's make-up and structure so that it could penetrate the body painlessly, retrieve the desired cells, and withdraw. And all using a fraction of the energy (and expense) it took to perform the same procedure on a nano bed. Yeah, that really *was* some toy, all right.

She was starting to feel a little sorry that she wasn't more actively enthused and fascinated by the thing as she followed Gold from bed to bed. That could have been the medication the beautiful doctor had dosed her with, of course. Or it might have been the fact that there wasn't very much for her to do. Occasionally, she repositioned the unit for him when the cord on the collecting tool wouldn't quite reach and from time to time, she would have to set the brake to keep it from rolling because he had forgotten. But other than verifying a few numbers off one of the read-outs for him, all she actually did was stand around wondering why Gold had insisted on her presence.

Once again, it seemed as if the man picked up on the gist of what she was thinking because he suddenly looked up and asked her to take his tablet and use it to collect patient information, including vitals readings. Pure busy work, but she moved to the next bed feeling relieved to be doing something other than holding down a section of floor.

Moving towards the first bed, she began to feel a bit like a spare part, an entirely redundant member of the Big Team, just a new little intern who knew nothing about anything.

Wouldn't have guessed you for a soldier, she told her first subject silently as she touched the tag on the inside of his wrist to the tablet. He didn't look any older than sixteen, and barely sixteen at that. She tried to picture him in a uniform instead of the loose white pyjamas. The nurses had pulled the top sheets back from every patient for Dr Gold's convenience and it was all Lynne could do to keep from not only covering him up again but tucking him in as well. She wasn't

sure whether she should have been amused or bemused with herself. Get thee behind me, thou unexpected maternal urge, and don't push.

The soldiers in the next two beds were female; Lynne estimated that both of them were about her own age. Their unconscious faces didn't look as vulnerable to her as they did simply slack, not completely alive. Why were they here, she wondered? And had they arrived here comatose from some earlier cause, or were they now being kept unconscious?

She was surprised and more than a little unsettled to find that the next soldier looked slightly familiar, although she wasn't really sure why. She called up his file on the tablet and checked his name: Derrida, Jacques. That, too, rang some bells but not the ones she had been expecting; something to do with a class she had taken as an undergrad journalism student. Maybe Jacques Derrida had gone to New Harvard, too? Maybe even taken some of the same classes? It wasn't completely beyond the realm of possibility.

The guy in the next bed also looked familiar. She scanned his data into the tablet and then called up the file: O'Toole, Salvador. No bells at all this time but the longer she looked at his face, the more familiar it seemed. Perhaps he reminded her of someone she knew?

She was actually relieved to find the next soldier was unquestionably a total stranger to her, although she decided to check the woman's name just to be sure. Jael, Jameela Lou. No bells there, either; she felt doubly relieved, although she wasn't really sure why.

Ali, Grace was followed by Krishnamurti, Clement; two more names she didn't know, Lynne thought, trying to pretend that she wasn't beginning to feel uneasy again. She paused at the foot of Krishnamurti, Clement's bed. There were eight or nine more for her to scan on this side of the room before she could start down the opposite row, where, she now noticed, the beds were closer together so that there were actually more of them on that side. Frowning, she wondered why.

"Lynne? Everything all right?"

She turned around quickly and met Gold's questioning gaze with a smile that she hoped was a lot more natural and pleasant than it felt. Perhaps she was getting better at turning it on when needed.

"Everything's just fine, Dr Gold."

"No problems with the scanner function on the tablet?"

She shook her head. "None at all."

He still had a speculative look on his face, as if he were trying to decide how likely it was that she would lie to him. Or maybe that was her guilty imagination.

"No problems at all," she reiterated. "I just couldn't help noticing that there were more beds on that side of the room than there are on this one and I was just wondering why."

"Ah." Dr Gold shrugged hugely. "Well, if you should happen to figure that one out, tell me, will you?"

She gave a polite laugh and went on to the next bed, trying her best to project an air of totally engaged diligence. Busy, busy, busy, she chanted to herself silently, we're all very busy here, she wasn't sure why she felt so jumpy. As if she were doing something she wanted to hide from Ramirez Gold and the other one, Haddad-O'Whatever, knowing at the same time that they were already suspicious.

Busy, busy, busy, chanted her mind as she took hold of the next patient's wrist, preparing to press the band around it to the tablet. We're all very busy. She caught sight of his face and froze.

This man she did know. She was absolutely certain, not only of that but also of where she knew him from. Immediately, she understood why the others had looked familiar to her as well. She could place them all without any trouble now; she could see them very clearly in her mind's eye.

She checked his name anyway, just out of curiosity, in spite of the fact that she was almost equally certain she had never had a chance to learn it before.

Estep, Çihan.

Lynne hesitated; Çihan stirred nothing in her memory but she had a vague near-memory of having seen the name Estep in plain block letters on a name plate. She flicked a glance at Gold to see if he was watching her again but he was busy, busy, busy with his back to her. Best for her to do the same, she decided; she just hoped that she would be able to keep up the act now that she knew what was coming

at her. What she had to face, as it were. In the face of adversity. That oh, so familiar face of adversity.

She was barely surprised when she came to the last bed on that side of the room and found Rena Sofira there. It seemed fitting more than anything else, a bit of inadvertent satisfaction for the inner drama queen that all flesh was heir to.

It was also a relief. Lynne had actually been afraid that when she finally did find Sofira, the lieutenant's unconscious state would somehow make her look so different that she wouldn't recognize her.

Good thing I'm chemically calmed, Lynne thought wryly. Otherwise I'd be wondering what this is all about and what the hell do I do now and is the shit I'm in already too deep to get out of.

As if on cue, Sofira's eyes flew open and looked directly at her.

THIRTEEN

The creature strapped to the table had no intellectual concept of things like paralyzing agent, nano neutralization charge, or organic ambiguity. All he knew was that even though he wasn't frozen in quite the same way as before, he could not move, a condition that had persisted for a very long time.

Not that he actually had any comprehension of time, either, not as people knew it. He could remember, in his way, and he could also anticipate, but only as those things applied to now, which was the only time that had any reality for him. The things that had already happened were not memories to be recalled, but what he was now. So were the things that he was going to do.

Actually, there was only one thing that he was going to do, and it was the only thing he ever had done: eradicate life. There was plenty of life to eradicate, although none of it in the immediate vicinity had come within reach of him in a while. But as always, he had sensed all those living things. They were moving around, spewing emotions, engaging in activities that produced more emotions for them to spew. If he could move, he would wipe them out; when he could move, he would.

At last, he found himself with a live human body close to him. She was only inches away but he still couldn't move. He stared up at her, unblinking, as she moved slowly around him, touching and prodding. She used odd devices on him, handheld tools that made little or no sound but caused changes in the areas of his body allowing her to penetrate him and cut out pieces, either close to the surface or from somewhere deeper inside.

The swarms of internal mechanisms that would have taken care of any injuries remained inert, as paralyzed as he was, but she had mechanisms of her own that she used to repair the damage. They worked as well as his own but they felt alien and wrong, and as they

moved around manipulating his substance, they produced sensations that did not belong with the way he was now, that he had not had since before his final transformation into anti-life: pain.

When the mechanisms finished, they withdrew from his body and the pain receded. The woman stayed, exuding the offensive, revolting essence of her life into the confined space so that it pressed in on him all over from all directions. Eventually, he somehow came to understand that he could not move because she didn't want him to.

That was so typical of the living. The living wanted, they needed and wished for, they desired, and the only way to make them stop was to obliterate them. Destroy them. Wipe them out.

The woman who hovered over him was particularly unrelenting in this area. All he could do was wait for her to change her mind and decide that she wanted him to move. Then he could kill her.

The fact that he was what she wanted so inexorably made no difference at all.

"I did not say that I am refusing to tell the interns to have half a dozen experimental subjects ready for neurosurgery by this evening," Supreme Allah said patiently. "I do not refuse to obey the order. I simply cannot carry it out."

Dr Hyacinth Stein's face, currently displayed in the lower right-hand corner of the flatscreen in a phone window, didn't change expression. But then, to do so would have meant having one in the first place. She didn't and Supreme Allah knew it wasn't because of some flaw in the video resolution.

"And I am telling you that this simply cannot be right," Stein told him. "There should be more than enough experimental subjects on hand for my requirements."

"There are not," he replied. Maintaining his patient tone was becoming a real effort, particularly with Omar Wing half-pacing, half-wandering around his office instead of planting his ass in the chair on the other side of her desk and keeping it planted. It could have been worse, though; Ramirez Gold could have been there as

well, not only helping him wear out the carpet but muttering under his breath. He looked a silent appeal at XY, who spread his hands helplessly.

"I am advised that there will be one mature skin-bag tomorrow," Supreme Allah went on. "But even pushing the development process to the absolute limit, it will take three days to give you another two. Then no more for three days."

"And do my colleagues all agree with you?" Dr Stein asked coolly.

"I have not asked them," he replied, just as coolly. "But if you want a second opinion, or a third, or a fourth, that's up to you. You are, after all, in charge."

"Yes, and I know what I'll hear," Stein said. "Fortunately, we're not confined to cloned resources."

In his peripheral vision, he saw Wing stop pacing. Supreme Allah hesitated. "I don't think I understand," he said slowly, wishing that he really didn't.

"There are over a dozen new arrivals currently quartered under sedation in the clinic," the woman said, her face still impassive. "Is that right?"

Supreme Allah didn't answer.

"Is that right?" prodded Stein.

"The soldiers," he said faintly.

"This is a military project being conducted in a military installation," Stein said, "which means clearance for their participation in any capacity is automatic." She paused and a barely perceptible frown appeared on her face. "Please make a note of that if you're having trouble remembering it." She broke the connection.

Supreme Allah turned away from the screen and started to say something, but XY was already calling down to the clinic and Wing had left the room.

"You broke quarantine early," said Omar Wing, standing at the observation window in Hyacinth Stein's office.

On the other side of the glass, Stein looked up from the incision she was making down the center of the creature's skull from a spot just above his forehead to his crown. A viscous substance the color of tar oozed out of the incision and dripped into the curved metal pan attached to the neck-brace holding the creature's head at Stein's preferred angle. "I reviewed the data and determined that it was perfectly safe to do so," she said, her voice sounding filtered in the small, tinny speaker. She eyed him dispassionately for a moment before resuming with the incision. "Do you have some objection?"

"Not to that."

She flicked a glance at him but did not stop what she was doing. Wing laughed silently at himself. As if she wouldn't pick up on that one. He was making it far too easy, and for no good reason. The woman wasn't going to let anything go just because it was too easy; she never had.

"Why don't you remove the mask?" he asked her.

"That's not a mask. It's his face." She paused to tap her scalpel on it with a muffled clang.

"But it looks like a mask. Why do you suppose that is?"

"I don't know," she said, dabbing at the incision with a thick square of gauze. "Any more than I know why you're suddenly so interested in this specimen." She gave him a sideways glance but didn't let her eyes linger.

"What would give you the idea that I wasn't interested?" Wing said evenly.

She was still focused on extending the incision past the crown and down to the back of the neck; if she had any reaction to what he'd said, he saw no sign of it in her profile. "Pardon, I misspoke. You'll have to forgive me, Dr Wing, I'm too busy at the moment to choose my words correctly. Perhaps we should continue this discussion later, when I can."

"Right, you've scheduled some neurosurgery. I noticed it on the schedule but I didn't realize you had decided to start on that early as well."

She flicked him another sideways glance. "I'm just taking an advance, look at my prize specimen here while the other subjects are

being prepped. And yes, of course I've already used the scanner," she added as he started to say something. "I've scanned and rescanned. I've even scanned the scans. Now I want to look at his brain matter personally, with my own eyes."

"And what are you hoping to accomplish with the other half-dozen?"

Stein stopped what she was doing again and straightened up slowly. "Actually, I don't know that I'll need to use all six." She tilted her head to one side, appearing to study him. "I want to compare brain configurations and try making a few modifications to the standard specimens. See if that will have any effect on their capacity to tolerate an increase in the level of internal nanos."

"Why would it?"

"I don't know, doctor. First we'll see whether it does, then we'll ask why." The impatience that had crept into her voice was starting to show on her face as well. "Please check on how preparations are going with the standard subjects for me, Omar. It seems to be taking a lot longer to prepare half a dozen specimens than it should, especially considering they're all life-ready and pre-sedated." When he didn't move right away, she made a little shooing motion with the scalpel.

Linda Numinen was the grunt on watch in the hallway by the entrance to Pre-Op. She was a little too gung-ho for Wing's taste so he had been surprised to find he had developed a real fondness for her in spite of that. He had to admit that the fact she was a classic beauty with mane of white blonde hair and a build like a Valkyrie might have helped. The hair was pulled back and wound into a neat coil and she had the same pasty look under the lousy overhead lighting that everyone else did. But it didn't hide the natural beauty of her features any more than the fatigues could hide the fact that she was a bit more voluptuous than the standard grunt of any sex.

"How are they?" Wing asked her.

She looked down the three inches she had on him in height and gave him a small, sour smile. "Sick."

"Sick?"

"Sick."

"What do you mean, sick?"

"Sick as in not healthy." The smile turned slightly mischievous. "You starting to get the idea, doc, or should I try semaphore?"

"Ah, yes, it's all coming back to me now. How did I live without you?" Wing gave her a pained look. "How many of them are sick?"

"As of fifteen minutes ago, all of them," Numinen said.

"All six?"

She gave a short laugh. "No, all twenty-five."

"Jesus," Wing breathed. Haddad-O'Reilly certainly hadn't wasted any time. "Why'd they bring any of them up to Pre-Op if they were sick?"

"They didn't get sick until the grunts brought them up here. When they called down to the clinic to say they were coming back to exchange them for healthy ones, they got the bad news."

Wing nodded. "Does it get any better than this?"

Numinen's smile widened. "Oh, it gets a lot better. Haddad-O'Reilly's up here now and she's instituted the same dress code for Pre-Op as she has down in the clinic; full-body condoms are mandatory, no exceptions. Suit up or ship out."

"Jesus," Wing said again. "So, who was the poor unlucky bastard who had to call Stein and give her the bad news?"

Numinen's smile faded. "As far as I know, Dr Stein is not yet aware of the situation."

"Great." Wing ran a hand through his short black hair. "I suppose it's too much to hope that you grunts really do have a secret apocalypse-proof shelter a few hundred feet below the complex where you can survive anything. Tell me it isn't, even if you have to lie to me."

Numinen snapped to attention and looked straight ahead. "Sir, this soldier cannot tell a lie, sir. It is not too much to hope that such a shelter exists. It is too much to hope that we will let you in. Sir." She

dropped the pose and gave him a wry look. "Sorry, doc. Rank has its privileges but grunts always get the last laugh."

Wing chuckled. "I'm surprised someone with your brains hasn't already figured out a way to end up with both."

"Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you."

"Argh." He clapped a hand over his heart. "The fatal blow. I'm skewered again."

"Or still." Numinen stepped to one side. "Full supply of condoms in the ante-room if you want to go in and have a look at the situation."

Wing nodded and started patting himself down, searching for his swipe card. "Damn it."

"Thought all you scientists made a habit of wearing your key-cards on a chain around your neck," Numinen said, pointedly not watching him.

"Only when I can actually remember to put it around my neck," he said, digging in his pockets now. "Which is only when I don't forget where I took it off."

"Of all the absentminded professors I've ever, uh, befriended, you're my absolute favorite." Numinen motioned for him to step back and produced her own card on a retractable line attached to her belt. "And this is the last time I'm doing this for you."

"Today," he added, fliply.

She looked over her shoulder at him. "You took the word right out of my mouth."

"Rank has its privileges," he said with a chuckle as she held the door open for him. "Thank you, private."

"You're welcome, but I did it for science, sir." She put on a solemn, professional soldier's face but she surprised the hell out of him by giving him a sly, almost lascivious wink just before she pulled the door shut again. Damn, the day was shaping up to be a very strange one, he thought. If he had just been listening in on that conversation, he'd have sworn there was something more than little friendly banter going on, even without seeing that wink. What could she have meant, doing something like that?

He shook his head and turned to the spray-cans stacked on the shelves to his left. Down at the other end near the entrance to the changing rooms, Haddad-O'Reilly had put up a freestanding screen reiterating her conditions for admittance. Wing scanned it quickly and was relieved to see that she wasn't insisting on an all-over scrub and total-immersion cleansing before the condom was applied. That would save him a bout of skin irritation; maybe he would get really lucky this time and the condom wouldn't react with his natural body oils and turn him purple—or at least not where it would show.

Wing felt self-conscious even before he stepped out of the spray-booth. It wasn't the first time he'd had to wear a full-body condom or even the hundredth, but it would never be anything but an ordeal for him. He could never decide which was more embarrassing, having to see his colleagues dressed in little more than a heavy coat of paint, or having to be seen by them.

As he emerged from the airlock-style portal between the changing room and the patient ward, he looked up and caught sight of one of the overhead cams; they were small and deliberately inconspicuous so as not to be a distraction, but they were always on. Right, he thought unhappily; somehow he had completely forgotten the embarrassment that could be provided by a visual record available to anyone who wanted to look at it.

Haddad-O'Reilly suddenly materialized next to him. "Did Stein send you?" She wore a surgical hood rather than the standard fishbowl head-piece. Her eyes looked tired and bloodshot in the transparent portion but she sounded cheerful.

"Fraid so." He grinned at her, knowing she was grinning back. "But if you think I'm going to trot my ass back to her office and give her the bad news, you are so wrong that you will never be right about anything ever again. Even if you are."

"You quantum topologists really have a way with words." She shrugged. "Doesn't make any difference who tells her, they're all sick."

"You mean it doesn't make any difference to them," Wing said as he followed her past a bank of monitoring equipment. The two nurses watching over the readouts were unrecognizable in full surgical coverage. Still uncomfortable, Wing wished he could have said the same but at least they didn't turn to stare at him openly.

There was a single row of six beds lined up against one wall, each one occupied. Haddad-O'Reilly stopped at the first one and motioned for Wing to stand next to her while she went through a cursory examination of the unconscious man plugged into the monitoring system via a catheter in his neck. "That's where you're one hundred percent wrong," she said, lifting one of the man's eyelids.

"Wrong about what?" Wing asked, bewildered.

"About the difference it makes to them." She lowered her voice. "This makes a whole goddamned lot of difference to them."

She insisted on making him take at least a brief look at all of the soldiers and he obliged her without protest. Doing so wouldn't tell him anything he couldn't get from the report already in the patient files but it was preferable to going back to Stein's office right away. He knew that he *was* going to have to be the one to tell her about this latest inconvenient development—unless for some bizarre and inexplicable reason she took it into her head to call the clinic herself. Or even show up in person.

Goddamn—Hyacinth Stein coming down here to get the bad news about the six-pack she'd ordered. That would be one killer of a shit-storm to get caught in—definitely no survivors. But also not likely to happen; given what she had been doing when he had last seen her, she was probably up to her elbows in her new specimen's brain by now. Nothing short of a planetary explosion would have torn her away from that.

"I thought all the soldiers were male," he said as he joined Haddad-O'Reilly beside the third patient.

She shook her head. "Was Stein expecting all men?"

"That was the impression I got," Wing replied. "The new specimen is male. The other subjects were supposed to match."

"Only if this new specimen of hers is actually human." Haddad-O'Reilly frowned at him. "You think it is?"

Wing nodded. "Enhanced human. Heavily enhanced."

Haddad-O'Reilly was silent for a long moment as they moved on to the fourth patient. This one was male and seemed to be substantially older than his fellow grunts. "Have you examined any of his tissue yourself?"

"No, I've just looked at the scans."

"Anything in them to explain how he can be human and carry several times the lethal level of nanos internally?"

"Not that I've come across."

Haddad-O'Reilly gave him a look. "And I don't suppose Stein is talking."

"Not to me."

"And there you have it," she said. "Nobody knows nothing about nothing. With the possible exception of Gunnar. He's probably managed to get his head so far up Stein's ass by now that he can hear what she's thinking."

In spite of everything, Wing burst into loud, hearty laughter.

"I don't know what *you're* laughing about." Haddad-O'Reilly gave him a wry, sideways look through half-closed eyes. "It's not like Gunnar's going to share any of his hard-won knowledge with us."

"If he were, there wouldn't be anything to laugh about," Wing said.

Haddad-O'Reilly frowned. "Shit, you're right."

They went on to the next bed in no particular hurry. Wing managed a further delay in reporting to Stein by taking time to reread each file, knowing the woman was not going to praise him for being thorough. She wasn't going to think it was a coincidence that all the soldiers had gone down sick at once and him taking so long to get back to her would only make her believe that he had something to do with it.

Yeah, but what the hell, whispered some distant and more reckless part of his mind in response to all his common sense thinking. What's Stein going to do, fire you? Have you court-martialed and risk a security breach? The military would never take that chance. If you're stuck, so is she.

As it turned out, there was nothing he had to tell Hyacinth Stein that she didn't already know.

FOURTEEN

The one question science might never answer, she thought as she straightened up from the magnificent specimen on the table, was why there were so many more horses' asses than there were horses. Not to mention how it was that, whenever she got rid of one, she would have barely thirty blessedly ass-free minutes before another one showed up.

Hyacinth Stein was no fonder of Gunnar Gottmund than any of his colleagues were. It had nothing to do with the fact that his unapologetic and brazen ambition had caused him to put his head so far up her ass that she could almost feel a lump in her throat. It wasn't even that she would have preferred someone else's head instead of his. Neither was it his tendency to walk around naked in his off hours, or his vanity in general, or his ridiculously puerile sex drive. And it most certainly wasn't because she had an unrequited yearning for him. Or vice versa, in which case she would only have disliked him even more.

Her antipathy to Gunnar Gottmund was due in good part to the fact that he was there purely as a favor to a member of Command who happened to be his uncle, but also just on general principle. Like everyone else, he was beneath her and didn't have the sense to know it. Dealing with him stole precious periods of time from her life, time that could have been put to far better use.

Once in a great while, however, Gottmund was actually of some real use to her. Even so, she was no more inclined to be favorably disposed toward him on these occasions, thanks in large part to his obvious belief that such occasions could in some way elevate his status to something more than a waste of space. Not that his attitude made any real difference one way or another; there were no circumstances under which she would ever find the man acceptable.

Now, as she forced herself to tolerate his presence in her office, she thought that acquiring the new specimen must have improved her frame of mind enough to have raised her irritation threshold. She felt less active loathing toward him at the moment than she usually did.

But then, since she was still in the lab, there was a thick glass partition between them. A pity it was the plain old kind without an opaque-ing function; she would have preferred it if she could have been spared the sight of Gottmund, particularly that fatuous, toothy smile. On the other hand, at least he wasn't naked.

"I don't know who Cosi Fan Tutte persuaded to put a tap on your buffers," Gottmund was saying, "or how it works. But if you give me a few hours, half a day or possibly less, I can put someone to work on a process to counter it. By proxy, of course, not directly. I wouldn't allow some low-rent techie near your system, let alone actually touch it. Any more than I would expect you to grant me even very limited access. Once the counter program was developed, I would simply send it to you with an auto-installer."

Stein stretched her mouth in what he would have to pretend was an approximation of a smile from someone with too much on her mind to manage the real thing. "Thank you, I'll watch for its arrival in my inbox. Was there anything else that you thought I should know about?"

He hesitated. "You're not going to like this at all."

She suppressed a sigh and looked down at the sterile cap she had put over the top of the specimen's head wondering how much longer it would be until she could get back to exploring the inside of his skull.

"Somehow, all of the soldiers in the clinic have been infected with a virus."

Stein continued to stare down at the specimen, forcing herself to show no reaction. Her gaze wandered to the eyes, still wide open and unblinking. Why *did* his face look like a mask? After a pause, she raised her head to look at the man on the other side of the glass.

"Somehow?"

"I'm afraid I don't know which virus or how it was introduced, but —"

"Care to guess?" she asked, her voice deceptively light.

"Well, if I were to look around for an immediate source," Gottmund said slowly, "the new intern would be first on my list."

Stein nodded once. "Go on."

The man looked smug now as well as fatuous.

"First, there's the most obvious reason; she's been outside the complex most recently. Now, exactly how she could smuggle in an infectious—"

"I *meant*, go on and look at the new intern as the possible cause of infection, intentionally or otherwise," Stein interrupted, no longer going to any trouble to keep the impatience out of her voice.

For a moment, he just stood there gaping at her in surprise. "You, you mean it?"

She glanced up at the ceiling in annoyance. "Why wouldn't I?"

"No, I'm sorry, I know, it's just..." he floundered, his pinkish face surprised, thrilled and nervous all at once. "Sorry, Dr Stein, I'll get right on this. Thank you for putting your trust in me. I'll take care of it right away."

"Right away would be good." Christ, he sounded like a fucking intern. She took another longer look at the ceiling and was relieved to find he was gone by the time she looked down again.

Instead of resuming her exploration of the specimen's skull, however, she took a seat on the adjustable stool next to the operating table and let what Gottmund had just told her sink in. The rabble was getting awfully bold, she thought, to pull a stunt like this. She couldn't decide how likely it was that Wing had been directly involved and then concluded that it didn't really matter. Given the chance, he would have been.

Unbidden, a new idea began to take shape in her mind. Even before it had all come together, she understood that it was a much better plan. Unorthodox in terms of procedure, as it meant skipping over certain steps, which would in turn up the danger factor. There were going to be fatalities, that was guaranteed, and not the usual kind. But it would yield a faster result and the military certainly wasn't going to find fault with her for that.

In the end, this would actually put her ahead of schedule. But the fact that it would also serve to teach the rabble a serious and unforgettable lesson about trying to fuck her over was pure, sweet icing of the most delicious kind.

Lynne estimated that the boy in the tube was about seven or eight years old. He might have been younger; when it came to judging children's ages, she had very little in the way of experience. She was fairly sure that he could not have been any older; she was also absolutely certain that she had never seen a more beautiful child.

His straw-colored hair fell to his shoulders, framing a face with the round cheeks and upturned nose characteristic of children who have years to go before the world begins to change. The position of his mouth in repose made it seem as if he were on the verge of smiling in his sleep. He might have been in the midst of a particularly pleasant dream from which he would awaken at any moment.

That's what makes the sight of him so horrifying, Lynne thought, breathing slowly and deeply through her nose in a concerted effort to keep from throwing up. It wasn't the cable feeding directly into his brain through the glass partition set into the top of his head or the hardware clamped to his bruised temples. Nor was it the tracheal tube coming out of his throat or the half-natural, half-artificial umbilical cord that snaked out of the center of his belly and under his left arm to connect with something behind him.

It wasn't even the vat itself, which Lynne thought should have been called a pod, the long transparent capsule where the boy lay with his body partially submerged in a colorless substance that made her think of jellyfish. It was how utterly normal and natural he seemed.

"That is *not* a child," Dr Gold said on her left. He was looking at her rather than the boy in the vat and she could sense the pity in his gaze. "It's only tissue in a shape that humans would identify as a male child. It's really just a cloned organism passing through one of its immature forms as part of the growth process. In six hours, it'll be fully grown, nowhere nearly as pretty, and no more a man than it was a boy. Not in the true spirit of those terms."

Lynne said nothing. At least his eyes remained closed; she could be grateful for that much. Another moment like the one she had had with Sofira was about the last thing she needed. Twitching muscles

due to random neuronal misfires—that was a good one. She wondered if Haddad-O'Reilly had made the nurse practice that one until she was absolutely sure he could say it with straight face. She continued to concentrate on her breathing.

"Not what you were expecting?" Dr Gold asked her. She couldn't decide whether she was really hearing an oddly light, almost taunting tone in his voice or just imagining it.

"The standard hospitals and medical centers all grow cloned organs in skin-bags," he said. "But what most people don't know is that it actually takes some extra time and effort to keep skin-bags from looking too human. It's not a massive amount of time and effort and it's not a terribly difficult procedure, really. But since it is something extra, it does add to the cost. This is something that Dr Stein has always felt was completely unnecessary."

He paused briefly and then went on, his voice becoming more brittle with every word. "Dr Stein says if we were able to overcome our characteristic cultural sensitivity to the matter of appearance and understand that the resemblance in this case is nothing other than superficial, we could reduce the cost of producing replacement limbs and organs to a fraction of what it is now. She even has a complete set of charts and spreadsheets that project in detail exactly how much money and time could be saved over a ten-year period." Pause. "The scientific research community as a whole was not swayed by her arguments. But within the confines of this project, her word is final, no appeal. The military are interested in results, not what her skin bags look like. And they're not averse to saving a little money."

Lynne made a polite noise of acknowledgement.

"Are you feeling unwell, as if you might faint or throw up?" Dr Gold asked her, the brittle tone completely absent from his voice. Before she could answer, he took hold of her elbow again and steered her past the growth vats into a darkened area of the lab. Lights flickered on automatically; not standard indoor lights, but simulated daylight, which emanated from sources placed in such a way as to suggest the presence of large windows.

It was a fairly popular style of lighting but it didn't always work. Sometimes the room was too large or too small or the wrong color.

Or the furnishings contradicted the illusion, which Lynne would have thought would be the case in any kind of laboratory, even one with real windows. But somehow, even with all those workspaces and consoles and equipment, the desired effect had been achieved, something for which Lynne couldn't help feeling profoundly grateful.

"It's been a very rough day for you," Gold observed with a studied neutrality. He set the slender metal case of tissue samples on top of a worktable. "I must say, this is not the day I was expecting to have, myself. I have never seen any clinic patients transferred to Pre-Op without someone taking a set of tissue samples from them first." He paused to look even sadder than usual.

"And the instant epidemic?" Lynne asked, hoping the question didn't really sound quite so arch to him as it did to her own ears. "How often does that happen?"

"I really couldn't tell you," he replied, his voice turning politely distant and even a little prim, as if she had asked him something embarrassingly intimate. "But if I had to guess," he surprised her with a sudden wry half-smile, "I'd say often enough to justify all the fuss and bother of full-body condoms. Otherwise, we'd be stuck in quarantine now, too. With the distinct disadvantage of not being able to sleep through it."

As he spoke, he opened the case and removed the tissue sample containers, handling the small silver cubes carefully as he put them on the workbench. He had collected only a dozen samples before Dr Haddad-O'Reilly had told them an infection of unknown origin had broken out among the patients and the two of them would have to leave.

"Why are the soldiers being kept sedated?" Lynne joined him at the workbench, standing on the opposite side.

"Orders."

"Whose?"

"Dr Stein's, of course."

"Isn't that kind of unusual, keeping them unconscious for so long?"

He glanced up in some surprise, as if he had neither expected her to ask such a question nor understood why she had. Then he made a

vague gesture toward the counter behind him. "Bring over some stasis chambers, will you?"

Lynne moved to obey and then stopped, scanning the length of the counter for anything that might have been both chamber-like and suggestive of stasis. The only thing she could think of was a thermos and she saw nothing like that.

"Second shelf, directly above the bacteria catalog," Gold added, without looking up from whatever he was doing with his tablet. "Which is the red storage unit that looks like a miniature refrigerator and says Bacteria Catalog on the front."

"Right. Sorry, I guess my eyes haven't adjusted to decent illumination." It took four trips for her to ferry over the right number of small but somewhat heavy objects. They didn't seem so much like chambers as they did votive candles from one of those retro churches her mother had been so fascinated with for a while. The inside even looked and smelled a lot like wax.

Gold thanked her and then moved one of the chambers to the center of the workbench so he could show her what to do. "You take one of the samples and set it down in the center," he said, doing so. "Try very hard to get it as dead center as possible. Watch it carefully and after a few seconds you'll see the cube starting to sink." He bent down so he could look at it on roughly the same level as the cube. "Do you see how it's started sinking a little?"

Lynne bent down to look at it from the same level. "I'm not—yes. Now I see it."

"When it starts to sink, press down on it firmly, but not too hard, until it won't go down any further. Like this." He showed her. "Then wait for it to sink some more and then press down again. Continue until the cube finally sinks below the surface of the chamber."

"Then what?"

"Then put it to one side and do the next one. It's a simple but effective method of hurrying nano integration." Gold straightened up. "When you've done all of them, clock out. Have a nice evening." He turned to walk away.

"Wait!" she said, a little louder than she had actually meant to.

He turned back to her looking sadly curious.

"Is that really all you want me to do?"

Gold frowned, as if he didn't quite understand her.

"I mean, there must be something else that I could be doing," she added quickly, wondering if she had just committed some outlandish breach of scientist/intern protocol. "Even something very simple?"

"Well..." The man seemed to think for a moment. "If something should happen to burst into flames, you can pull the fire alarm."

Before she could say anything else, he was gone.

There were very few places in the installation that felt reasonably private and technically, none that really were. However, the determination and tenacity with which human beings strive to meet their needs is essentially the story of human survival. The need for privacy was as strong as the need for security or social contact or gratification or any other kind of need.

When two human needs merged, they usually became much more than the sum of their parts. How much more depended on which needs were involved; when one of them happened to be the sex drive, virtually nothing could stand in the way. In the installation, the sex drive went hand-in-hand with the need for privacy, so it didn't take long for things to happen.

Restricting sex was the best the military could or would do; forbidding it was out of the question. Thanks to millennia of accumulated experience, Command in the twenty-sixth century knew better than even to try such a thing, regardless of the circumstances. Thus it was that in the complex, regulations permitted grunts to screw each other senseless while interns could frolic with other interns, but there was to be no crossover between the two, no fraternization between grunts and interns. Command level promised that the rule would be heavily enforced.

This only served to insure that it would be broken within an hour of its being issued by, unsurprisingly, the Sex Maniacs. Having been grunts themselves before their selection for fast-track reeducation in the sciences, they were already experienced at remaining

undiscovered while circumventing rules that inconvenienced them. This gave them a clear advantage from the start, even beyond the motivation provided by their unswerving dedication to the proposition.

That grunts had solved the problem was not actually as surprising as it might have seemed at first glance. The grunts were the *de facto* experts on privacy as well as the lack of it by virtue of the simple fact that barracks have been their standard accommodation from time out of mind, and the super-secret, ultra-expensive underground complex was no exception.

Barracks-dwellers down through the ages have learned a multitude of tricks, making certain adjustments to allow for the ever-changing times as well as inventing new ones when necessary. In fact, it's probably safe to say that grunt-style ingenuity and inventiveness has had as much to do with the survival and advancement of the species in general as anything else.

Considering that as interns, the Sex Maniacs enjoyed the privilege of private rooms, it was probably also safe to say that, at least in their case, you could take the grunts out of the barracks but you couldn't take the barracks out of the grunts.

The Sex Maniacs weren't the only ex-grunts to become interns; roughly half the group were soldiers who had been successfully retrained. The rest of the interns were civilians, or had been civilians, which the military had recruited from other projects. Some had come voluntarily and some had been forcibly drafted. The Sex Maniacs discovered inadvertently that it was actually quite easy for them to tell which was which without having to come right out and ask: those belonging to the latter group were never interested in getting laid.

This went along with their firm belief that there was one and only one truly reliable method for gauging the quality of life: Sex = good, No sex = bad. Indeed, they were appalled at having to be in service with people whose lives, from their standpoint, weren't worth living. As content as the three of them had always been in the military,

separately and together, this was why they were all virulently opposed to any sort of draft. You didn't have to be the sharpest knife in the drawer to know that these were not the kind of people you wanted to have around you in a combat situation, something that could spring up at any moment no matter how peaceful things seemed to be. Your best chance of survival was among soldiers who had as much to live for as you did.

Knowing that there wasn't actually very much they could do about the military's more ill-advised actions, they did the only thing they could: they continued to have as much sex as possible. Perhaps that would promulgate good karma and thus reawaken any will to live that might have gone dormant. And if not, what the hell? Sex was still its own reward.

Since the military only regulated sexual activity rather than forbidding it, there were certain areas that had been set aside to allow recreation in private. Command was unwavering in its insistence that rooms in the No-Tell Motel, as the grunts called it, were not under surveillance. If there actually were any people naïve enough to believe that, none of them were grunts.

Most grunts had been in long enough to know that in fact, their sex lives were of little to no interest to those doing the surveillance, and they were right. If their methods of getting around rules and regulations bordered on divine inspiration, what they did after that was neither original nor imaginative.

But that wasn't really the point anyway. It was the principle of the thing. Thus, even when the grunts weren't violating the no-fraternization order by having sex with un-authorized partners, they often proceeded as if they were. Pretending to break the rules was almost as much fun as breaking them.

The method pioneered by the Sex Maniacs to get around the lack of privacy owed a great deal to Kray's background in encryption and steganography. It was also deceptively easy. All a privacy-loving individual had to do was log into the holo gaming area, set up an

avatar as a decoy, and then, while the avatar was playing the game, slip through a trap-door in the software that allowed access to the infrastructure of the holographic setting.

The access was actually for the convenience of engineers intending to perform software maintenance. To the grunts, who were intending to perform something else entirely, it was akin to hiding behind the scenery on a stage set. In this case, however, they were slightly more involved. They were encrypted in the holo setting, whatever it was—jungle, city, ocean, asteroid—and at the same time, inert to it, unable to affect it without the pertinent program codes. If the ambience wasn't ideal, privacy was all but guaranteed. Short of a complete power failure, there wasn't much chance of being exposed.

Well, not unless someone decided to take a close look. But that was the beauty of the whole thing. No one who used the holo gaming area, conventionally or otherwise, was going to blow the whistle, while those who didn't game had no interest in anything that went on there. Hyacinth Stein, for example, found the prospect of examining surveillance records from the gaming area about as desirable as several hours with Gunnar Gottmund, nude.

FIFTEEN

Lynne was stretched out on the narrow bed in her "cell" as everyone else seemed to call it, with her headphones on, trying to shut out all the distractions of other people. Other people's noise and other people's secrets trapped within this enclosed space of the complex; all constantly under surveillance.

No one had had to tell her that she, along with everyone else here, was being monitored all the time. Even if no human being was watching the surveillance, it was all being recorded. She was sure that powerful Als were always monitoring absolutely everything, ready to alert human monitors to anything they found suspicious.

The knowledge made her feel naked all the time, not just when she was as good as naked, wearing an all-body condom. She even found herself wondering if her thoughts couldn't have been monitored in some way as well. But that couldn't be so, she told herself. If that had been true, she'd never have been allowed into the complex, because they'd have recognized her as a spy. She would probably have ended up as inert, helpless and sedated as those grunts from the Three Mile Island plant, including Rena Sofira.

Lynne was still trying to process the information that the woman who had enabled her to escape from the chaos and death at Three Mile Island, to put as much space as possible between herself and that killing machine, was now a helpless captive. God only knew what hideous fate lay in store for a grunt who had been diagnosed as beyond help.

She doubted that Sofira or any of the other grunts in that ward had really been damaged beyond repair by what had happened at Three Mile Island. When she had last seen Sofira, just before leaving Three Mile Island forever, she had seemed remarkably unscathed by her ordeal. When Lynne had tracked down her name to this military research complex, she had assumed the lieutenant had been reassigned to guard duty there, not sedated and shoved into a ward full of people who, supposedly, were checked in at the last medical pit-stop before death.

The scientists tried to tell Lynne that when Sofira's eyes opened it was some kind of involuntary muscle spasm, neuronal misfire or some such bullshit, that she hadn't really been waking up or becoming aware. Like hell, thought Lynne, because if that was the case, why had they been so fast to shoot Sofira full of medication, which was almost certainly more sedative. After which there had certainly been no more "involuntary muscle spasms".

Lynne knew that grunts, whether lieutenants or higher ranks, were just there to be used, as far as the military, and anyone like Hyacinth Stein working with them, were concerned. And she had the very strong feeling that by the time Stein or anyone else on her scientific team had finished with them, Rena Sofira and all the other grunts lying still and helpless in that ward were going to be all used up. As in: flush into the recycling bin. As in: shove into the furnaces and save some money on fuel. As in: gone. It was bad enough, Lynne thought, that these scientists were using skin-bags that looked exactly like human beings; let alone that they were using real, live human beings as experimental subjects.

She knew that she owed Sofira her freedom and almost certainly her life. There was no way she was going to let the lieutenant get used like some left over piece of tissue. For all her determination, though, she came up blank on exactly how she was going to get Sofira out of the ward. She realized that time was short. In fact, for all she knew, Sofira was already on the way out of the ward to whatever fate awaited her; on the way out of life. She was scared, she was angry, but more than anything she was resolute. There was always a way.

Closing her eyes, she tried to let the sound of her favorite music calm her. In the absence of the famous LROs, it was the best she could do. No doubt LROs were better and faster and more reliable but she had a feeling that the long-term effects might be distinctly unpleasant, undesirable, and rather more difficult to cure than anxiety.

"I don't have anything against the Sex Maniacs." Gold looked at Supreme Allah wearily. "I just question whether they're actually intelligent enough for the kind of intrigue that doesn't involve getting someone into bed."

"They are very intelligent people," Supreme Allah said patiently. He sat back and put his feet up on his desk, much to Gold's undisguised displeasure. The good doctor had never discovered the joys of going barefoot. "They are just... hyperactive."

Now Gold looked pained. "That's one way to put it."

"You have worked with all the interns, yes? Have the Sex Maniacs been wanting in some way?"

"God, yes." Gold gave a short laugh. "It's *what* they're wanting. All the time. And not just in some way, in every way."

Supreme Allah shook his head. "If everything is a double-entendre for you, too, then you should be able to reach an understanding with them most easily."

The scientist glowered at him. "Didn't Dr Haddad-O'Reilly ever tell you that nobody loves a smart ass?"

Supreme Allah raised his eyebrows. "Fatima? Surely you've got to be joking."

It was just a fluke that Kray was the only one not reaping the rewards of his own background in encryption when Supreme Allah's call came in that evening. He had forgone doing the holo sidestep in favor of hanging out in the lounge with the new intern. He'd known that there was no chance they would end up doing anything more than listening to music or watching 3D together but he was broadminded and besides, tomorrow was another day.

As it turned out, once the conversation got going, he had actually done most of the talking. Not because he'd intended to, it was just that she had asked him a shit-load of questions. Stuff about being a grunt and how he had been retrained, stuff about the complex, what the scientists were really like, what was Ramirez Gold always so sad

about, and was there something going on between Zelda and Fredo, which was good one.

Somewhere in the conversation he mentioned LeBlanc Watchamacallit and they ended up talking about him a lot, even though Kray had barely said a dozen words to the guy in the whole time he'd been there, right up to the day he'd disappeared. It seemed as if she would have been perfectly happy to sit there listening to him all night but eventually, Kray found himself getting tired of the sound of his own voice. He pretended to be sleepy and went back to his quarters, feeling a strange mixture of disappointment and uneasiness he knew had no connection with him not having had sex.

Then Supreme Allah had phoned and he'd put the whole thing out of his mind.

When Supreme Allah had been introduced to him as the man in charge of the interns and therefore his immediate superior, Kray had not been quite sure what to make of him. He had met all kinds in the military and that included kinds that he had never imagined—and that was only taking humans into account. The Allies Exchange Program had already been well under way at the time of his enlistment, so he had gone through boot camp with a wide variety of colors and textures, not to mention a few tentacles, tubes, and tails. The underlying point of boot camp had remained unchanged for centuries; two months of that and you came out the other side knowing there was nothing you didn't have in common with any of your fellow grunts, sisters, brothers and others.

Retraining had been as rigorous as boot, but in an entirely different way. Kray had come out of it still very much a grunt at heart, never suspecting that he would be reporting to a civilian authority. Thus, his first thought on seeing Supreme Allah, dark and bony in soft, gauzy white tunic and trousers, unrestrained dreadlocks draped over his shoulders and streaming down his back, was to wonder if the aliens he'd gone through boot with had thought that Rastafarians had tentacles.

He then realized that the man wasn't military. Putting a civilian in charge was a concession to the interns who were grunts in name only. Privately, Kray was rather surprised that they'd having such an obvious civilian in a management thought it was really necessary to make a point of or command position. They could have chosen some NCO and just let the interns think they were working for someone not in the military. Any non-commissioned officer with half a brain could have pulled that off easy. There must have been some civilian somewhere on the project with a hell of a lot of stroke.

Non-military leadership was completely unfamiliar to most of the grunts, including Kray, who wondered if any civilian could hold their own in the midst of a military complex. It became clear right away that Supreme Allah could. The guy was just plain smart; he had everyone's number including the scientists, most of whom deferred to him at one time or another in at least subtle ways. This was something that all the interns found interesting to various degrees.

Kray himself didn't think it was all simply down to the man's superior stock of ganja rope. On the other hand, he didn't rule it out completely, either. After all, it was some pretty goddamned good ganja. And for anyone who wasn't getting laid, it had to be the only thing that would make them even vaguely glad to be alive.

He was mildly disappointed to find that Supreme Allah hadn't summoned him to his red, gold, and green den for a little mid-week rope-a-dope. His position gave him the privilege of two rooms plus bath, as opposed to the scientists' full-sized apartments or the single cells the interns occupied. Kray had no doubt that Supreme Allah's décor was unique. The red-gold-green beaded curtains, the icons, tapestries and art had been arranged in such a way that, although Kray had never had any trouble finding the lavatory even after a full foot of rope, he still couldn't figure out where the bedroom was.

Kray told himself he hadn't really expected any ganja. As far as any of the interns knew, Supreme Allah never got anyone roped during the week. He claimed that rushing to ingest a counteractive agent to neutralize the effects and sober up after too short a period of time was a disservice to the sacrament. As Kray saw it, this was just one more thing the man was right about.

What Supreme Allah did want, on the other hand, was something that he would not have imagined even if he had been roped.

"I did know that you were, ah, abstaining from the usual nightly game," Supreme Allah told him as they sat on the comfortable collection of pillows that served as a sofa.

"You did?" Kray felt a faint ripple of uneasiness pass through him.

"Only Alonzo and Powell are logged into the gaming area. Scavenger-treasure hunt."

"If you say so. Like you said, I abstained." He shrugged, doing his best to keep his expression neutral.

"Abstinence." Supreme Allah nodded, his smile sly and knowing. "They say it makes the heart grow fonder. You think they're right?" His smile widened. "Or do you think it's something other than the heart?"

Kray intended to give a polite laugh to cover his unease but when he opened his mouth, no sound came out.

"Never mind, never mind," Supreme Allah said, making a dismissive motion with one bony hand. "This is not a raid, your secret stays a secret. The wise man does not tell everything he knows." He frowned suddenly. "Breathe."

"I am breathing," Kray said, feeling a little embarrassed.

"You are now." Supreme Allah looked amused. "Interns and grunts are not the only ones who have discovered this useful feature. All who know of it are also mindful that the deception will not stand up to close examination. Which, of course, most people are not knowledgeable enough to do in the first place. More than once, an avatar has passed for real unquestioned, even among the real themselves."

"Oh, yeah?" Kray frowned. If he had heard that from another grunt, he'd have laughed it off. Avatars were pretty good but he had never thought they were anywhere near that good. Supreme Allah, on the other hand, wasn't given to mistaking vapor for gold. He laughed a little nervously. "So, uh, where do *you* go?"

"Who said anything about me?"

This time, the wave of unease that swept through him was almost intense enough to produce a little vertigo. Man, there was definitely something really, really non-normal going on around here tonight, he thought. Zelda and the new intern had said something pretty goddamned similar to each other just this morning and that couldn't have been any goddamned coincidence, that was for sure. In a top secret military installation like this, there was no such thing as a coincidence.

All right then, but what the hell was creeping him out other than the possibility of getting canned for a little off-campus horizontal bop? Kray shook his head slightly to clear it and looked around the living room wondering if there could have been so much residual rope in the furnishings that it was possible to get high just by breathing the air.

"Okay." Supreme Allah gave a long and somewhat put-upon sigh. "Then just tell me one thing: is this a bad time to ask a favor?"

Kray gave serious consideration to undertaking the task alone. There was really no reason why he couldn't have under the circumstances. It was just that it went against standard grunt training. Nobody ever went completely solo on a covert operation, no matter what it was. Not unless they knew for certain that there wasn't anyone around them they could trust. He was goddamned lucky not to have that problem.

He had been sure that neither Alonzo nor Powell would thank him for barging in on them and man, had he been right about that.

The holographic sidestep was so convenient and easy that Kray couldn't help feeling nervous sometimes. Was it really possible that Command wasn't on to the whole dodge and just waiting for the right moment to spring some kind of trap? When he had shared his

misgivings with Alonzo and Powell, both of them had conceded that it wasn't out of the question.

"But if that's the case," Alonzo had added, looking wise in spite of the fact that a) they were all sweating languidly in the steam room and b) there was a happy face on his midsection composed entirely of hickeys except for his navel which served as the nose, courtesy of an especially playful lady grunt, "we all might as well have as much sex as we possibly can while we're waiting for the axe to fall. Unless you can think of a better way to pass the time?"

"He's right," Powell said. "They've got us anyway so we might as well make the most of however much time we've got left."

The last few words had seemed to snag on something in Kray's mind; he had felt the goose walk over his grave, sending a chill through him that momentarily cancelled out the heat and raised goose-bumps visible to the other two on his sweaty skin. 'However much time we've got left' seemed to have an ominous quality to it beyond what Powell had intended.

The memory bobbed to the surface of his thoughts as Kray slipped out of the main area of the holo game currently online and into the backstage area, but he didn't pay much attention to it. At the moment he was more concerned with just how pissed-off his fellow Sex Maniacs were going to be. If the situation had been reversed, he probably would have kicked ass first and asked questions later.

As it turned out, Powell had a more tempered response even if neither he nor the enchanting Linda Numinen were particularly thrilled. To his unconcealed delight, however, he managed to pull Alonzo away before a certain playful lady grunt could finish refreshing the whimsical design on his torso in her own unique way. The half-circle looked like a lopsided rising sun with a bellybutton, which Kray thought looked even funnier.

He stopped laughing, however, when Linda Numinen insisted on coming with them.

"Stein leaves her goddamned lab unlocked and unguarded?" Alonzo asked Linda Numinen incredulously.

Numinen paid no attention to him. She was flattened against the wall, peering around the corner to the next hallway. Hyacinth Stein's office was barely ten feet away and it was indeed unlocked and unguarded, according to the readings on her hand-held sentinel.

"Well?" prodded Alonzo. "Does she?"

Numinen drew back and turned to him. "Yes, she does. Probably just as a convenience for herself, since the security system in the hallway is fully armed and active." She showed him the data on the sentinel screen. "You couldn't breathe the air within ten feet of her office without alerting her."

"So how the hell are we supposed to get around that?" Powell gave Kray a moderately disgruntled look.

Numinen smiled fondly at him and pinched his smooth cheek between her finger and thumb. "Inter-dimensional travel, honey." She herded them all back down the hall to the stairs and led them up to the next floor.

Five minutes later, she was shimmying through an air duct in her underwear, her sentinel lodged securely in her bra and Kray's comm link much less securely in her ear due to lousy fit. Too bad she hadn't brought her own comm, but she had never imagined for a moment that she was going to need it. She had been all set for a few hours of very friendly and completely gratuitous sex, not an impromptu covert op. She certainly wouldn't have been crawling through the walls in her best fuck-me lingerie right now if not for the fact that Kray had said the magic word: Stein. She didn't mind postponing the pleasures of the flesh for the sake of something that involved getting an edge on that grizzled bitch.

"You had better not forget you're gonna owe me major for this," she whispered as she reached a T-junction.

"Where are you?" Powell's voice was tinny and filtered in her ear.

"Just about to slither into the space between the very floor you boys are standing on and the ceiling of Stein's office." If I'll fit, she added silently. This looked like it was going to be an even tighter squeeze than the one she had just come through.

It was also a lot dustier. Thank God she had opted for permanent respiratory filters right after boot. The surgery had been expensive and a bit more painful than advertised, but in the end it had been worth it about a million times over. She had been spared environmental asthma over and over again; God only knew what wasn't going to end up in her lungs after this.

She maneuvered past the T-junction so she could change her position from feet first to head first and began pulling herself forward with her elbows. Immediately, her bra dragged downward, the straps impairing the movement of her arms. Fuck it, she thought, reaching behind with one hand and springing the clasp so that the bra would just come off as she inched forward. Unfortunately, it meant having to leave her sentinel behind along with it but there was nothing she could do about that.

Her panties were less cooperative. By the time she reached the access to the ceiling in Stein's office, they had become an uncomfortable, lumpy roll around her hips.

"Where are you now?" asked Powell.

"As far as I can tell, directly under you," she replied. She could hear muffled footsteps as he paced back and forth almost directly above her, causing dust to shower down on her intermittently. "Hold still, will ya? Your pacing is driving me crazy."

The footsteps came to an abrupt stop. "Sorry."

"She's not stuck, is she?" asked Alonzo in the background.

"No, I'm not stuck," she said, amused. "Just don't let me forget to pick up my underwear on my way out, okay?"

"Pardon?" said Powell with some alarm. "You took off your underwear?"

"Had to. There was no other way," she chuckled. "Never mind. You had to be there."

"Could somebody tell Corporal Numinen this isn't a sex fantasy?" Alonzo said, sounding impatient.

She chuckled some more as Powell and Kray shushed him. "Well, maybe it's not his sex fantasy," she said, unable to help herself. Alonzo sounded practically *prim*, which was some kind of

accomplishment considering what a horny little bastard he actually was.

"Be serious for a minute, Linda," Powell said tensely. "Are you really all right?"

"Right as rock'n'roll," she said. "Now shut up. I need to save my breath here."

She practically had to dislocate her shoulder to reach the vent panel in the office ceiling, which made it even more difficult to feel how the panel was attached. There were no screws, brackets, or hinges that she could locate. Pulling the panel up towards her was no good; hoping for the best, she thrust her stiffened fingers against it as hard as she could.

The vent popped out of the ceiling and fell to the floor with an oddly muffled thump, barely missing the edge of Stein's desk.

"Now if only I can land that easily," she muttered

"What?" Powell asked, his filtered voice high and anxious. "Are you all right?"

She groaned. "For the umpteenth time, yes, I'm all right."

"Linda, are you absolutely sure that you couldn't have gone directly into the lab instead?" came Kray's voice suddenly. "I just looked at the blueprint again and the ducts don't look like they're that much smaller than any of the ones leading into Stein's office."

"And they say men have better spatial judgment." She laughed at him. "Listen, babe, you'll just have to trust me when I tell you the lab ducts don't have to be that much smaller than this one to be impossible. Not one of you guys could have made it even half this far without getting stuck." She chuckled. "If I bought a bra this tight, I'd suffocate."

"Say again?"

"Shh, I'm concentrating."

Finally, she maneuvered herself past the access to the ceiling so that she could try wiggling through the opening in the ceiling feet first. It was an even tighter squeeze but she managed to lower herself to the desktop instead of falling directly to the floor on her head. Her panties, however, failed to make it through; she looked up to find them dangling in shreds from the end of the vent.

"Now I know how Portafoy felt back in boot camp when we ran his thong up the flagpole," she said.

"Say again?" Powell sounded slightly annoyed. "I thought you were concentrating."

"Oh, I am." She turned to look at the enormous humanoid figure strapped to the table in the lab on the other side of the glass partition. Jesus, it really was a frigging monster. "I most certainly am."

If she didn't know for certain that Powell, Alonzo, and Kray had been grunts before they had become interns, Linda Numinen thought, trying to block out the tinny sound of them squabbling with each other as she worked, she might have had trouble believing it. They were acting like they had never done anything other than fret over how many pinheads could dance on the head of a quark, not like the combat-seasoned hard-bodies she had served two years with before they had all been stationed here.

She paused to dial down the volume in the comm link before she resumed wedging a flat-blade screwdriver between the glass partition and a section of the frame. The screwdriver had been quite the stroke of luck. About the last thing she would have ever expected to find under the desk in Hyacinth's Stein's office was a toolbox. And with actual tools in it, no less. All brand new and as far as she could tell, virtually untouched, which was even weirder, she supposed. God only knew why the stuff was there at all. Hyacinth Stein, do-it-yourselfer?

Well, there were stranger things abroad in the universe. She glanced up briefly at the creature in the lab.

An eighteen-inch section of the frame pulled free of the glass with a pop; she folded it down without detaching it from the wall and moved on to the next section. The three months she had spent in construction were once again paying off. That had been one very crap detail, nothing but endless heavy lifting all day that left her too tired to do anything in bed other than sleep. She hadn't realized just how

much practical knowledge she had picked up, let alone how far its usefulness would extend.

On the other hand, she was fairly certain that there was really no way she could have foreseen how often breaking-and-entering was going to figure in her future activities. Although not nearly as often as sex, thank God.

And she fervently hoped that this was the first and last time that the two would ever intersect.

"How far have you gotten?" Powell asked her faintly.

"Almost halfway there," she told him. "And it'll go faster if I don't have to give you a running commentary or regular progress reports." She tuned him out and kept working until she had pried back every part of the frame from the glass. Then all she had to do was lever the glass away from the frame on the other side and it would pop right out...

Goddamn, the son of a bitch was heavy. She staggered a little under the weight of the partition and then managed to steady it against her body—not the most comfortable way to hold a pane of glass. Not to mention the fact that she now had to clean boob and belly prints off it before she crammed herself back into the duct again. A woman's work is never done. Laughing to herself, she set the glass down, leaning it carefully against the wall, and climbed through the opening to the lab.

"Okay, guys, I'm in," she said. "How's it looking where you are?"

"No harm, no alarm," Powell assured her. "You were right. Security doesn't register anything moving around inside as long as it didn't cross a designated boundary. And there's no designated boundary across any of the air ducts."

"Good. If I were wrong, this would be one fucking lousy way to find out."

"This is too simple," came Alonzo's voice, barely audible in the background. "Why isn't there any security on the air ducts? That's stupid!"

"Powell, tell old lady Alonzo about how alarms were going off every time some over-grown skin bag twitched," she growled. "But do it away from the link. You guys are really starting to get on my nerves."

She found herself tiptoeing cautiously around the thing on the table, her arms cuddled protectively against her chest. Christ, it really was a monster, just by virtue of its size if nothing else. There may have been a few grunts in Black-Black Ops that big, but not many and nobody she knew personally. Except maybe for one guy. She frowned, trying to remember his name. Brady? Bradfield?

No, Brodski, that was it. Not someone she had really known except in passing, although she would have liked to. Big and beautiful but not stuck on himself, a lifer with a pretty distinguished service record. Then some kind of bodyguard or babysitting detail went bad, which also had something to do with the Solaris disaster. Brodski ended up flaming out, literally, on a long fall from the wild black yonder. How did that old Prevac slogan go again? Better to burn up than fade away, something like that?

She pushed the thought away, eyeing the figure on the table. Rumor had it this creature of Stein's was somehow connected to both it and the fuck-up at Three Mile Island, Sounded pretty farfetched to her, like a wet dream for one of those conspiracy geeks that somehow always homed in on her brother Dan in bars. But damn, the way the thing looked in that body armor-like it could have destroyed Solaris single-handedly and then dropped down on Three Mile Island without a parachute.

Concentrate, she ordered herself firmly. "Powell," she said, tapping the comm link to turn up the volume again. "Did you say there were already some tissue samples that Stein took, or am I gonna have to dig them out myself?"

"Look around and see if you can find any containers with labels on them."

"Now I'm on a naked scavenger hunt. Great." Numinen gave a long, exasperated sigh as she turned to the counter behind her, putting her back to the creature. "Can you give me any hints as to what these labels might say? 'Monster mash? 'Creature feature?' 'Pi to ten places?'"

"Sine, cosine, cosine, sine-3-point-1-4-1-5-9," Kray chanted.

"Tell Kray if that's his idea of a dirty limerick, he shouldn't quit his day job," she muttered, moving down to the double sink at the end of

the counter on her left. Nothing there, not even soap. Next to it was a piece of equipment she recognized as a centrifuge; lifting the cover she looked inside but the few test tubes inside were clean and empty. She barely glanced at the small, pressure-plate scale next to that.

"Try looking around for some kind of half-height refrigeration unit under the counter," Powell suggested

She stepped back and had a look; nothing but plain cabinet doors.

"Do you see anything?"

"Not yet. Give me a minute," she said, opening the first door at the far end.

"It's getting late," complained Alonzo.

"Hey, anyone who's tired can pack it in and go to bed," she snapped. "Including me." She went on to the next set of doors.

"Nothing," she announced after reaching the other end. "Looks like I have to play doctor with this guy. Who wants to talk me through it? And keep it simple, will ya?"

"I hear and obey," Powell answered. "Just take a blood sample."

"Shoulda just done that in the first place," she muttered, grabbing a sterile-wrapped syringe out of a nearby tray. "Okay, you guys have a preference or should I just take what I can get? Don't answer that," she added quickly, tearing the packaging off the syringe and then noticing there was no wastebasket. Hell with it, she thought, crumpling the plastic and tossing it into the nearest cabinet.

Linda Numinen had drawn blood plenty of times under a wide variety of conditions. It wasn't really difficult, although it could be tricky finding a vein with some people. With this guy, the problem was finding skin to expose. The body armor wouldn't budge and pushing the needle through the rubbery cloth (or whatever it was) would probably contaminate the sample.

Maybe she could try the blood vessels under the eyes? No,—uh-uh, not in this lifetime. She wasn't that good with a needle.

She made a careful, inch-by-inch inspection of the area around the edge of his mask—from just under his left ear up to his temple across his brow where a hairline would have been and down the other side. Still nothing, not even a centimetre of bare skin. Like that mask-like

thing on his face had been put on and then hermetically sealed to the front of his head...

She froze, holding the needle up and away from the body in one hand, the other resting lightly on the cheek area of the mask. There was a glint of light from the darkness of the eyehole. She could have sworn that the thing's eyes had been shut when she had come in but now, try as she might, she couldn't remember whether she had actually seen that for herself or whether she had just taken it for granted.

But okay, what if his eyes were open after all? So what? It didn't mean he was conscious. Stein had him paralyzed, after all.

Numinen suddenly became aware of her heart pounding too hard and fast in her chest. Don't panic, she ordered herself. You're too smart to panic, too good, too experienced. You're just a little freaked because you're doing all this goddamned buck-naked. Just take a look at this freak and you'll see for yourself there's nothing going on. Nothing to be afraid of, even if you were wearing a tank. Nothing.

She leaned over the creature so she could get a look at his eyes.

They were wide open, unblinking and staring up at nothing.

That's right; nothing. Our theme of the evening; nothing. As in, nothing to be afraid of.

All at once, she became aware that she had been holding her breath. She started to let it out when the creature's eyes suddenly swivelled in their sockets and looked directly at her.

It was just by reflex that she opened her mouth to scream but before she could even try to take a breath, something hard and merciless clamped itself around her neck, cutting off her air. Now that's what I call a real tight squeeze, she thought dizzily; that's a painfully tight squeeze.

Patches of darkness swam through her vision and she was dimly aware of the comm link tumbling out of her ear and bouncing off her shoulder. She could feel something in her neck crack under pressure as her feet left the floor, but the sensation was so distant now that it didn't seem to have anything to do with her.

Then there was nothing at all, not even darkness.

There was no expression on Hyacinth Stein's face as she watched the events unfolding on the large wall monitor in her living room. She had been expecting something like this, but she had thought it would be one of the scientists. Perhaps Gold, or possibly even Wing doing his own dirty work, maybe calling on one of the more devious ex-jarheads for a little help in getting around the security system. Jamming the alarms and sneaking in through the door would have been a lot less strenuous than slithering through an air duct.

Though not nearly so entertaining. It was a miracle that silly, oversexed Amazon had managed to pull it off, along with all her clothes. Neither Gold nor Wing would have had a chance. Not even if they'd been stripped naked and greased from head to toe, with a wedge of cheese tied to their balls and a starving rat in pursuit for extra incentive. And considering what she had learned from the miniscule sample of brain tissue she had been able to analyse, the little scenario that had just played out was virtually perfect.

Shame about the lab, though. But she had no one to blame but herself for cancelling out the restraints and allowing the creature to flail around with the grunt's body. Every single item in the room that could have been broken had been and anything not actually destroyed had been dented, scratched, or bent. And, of course, just about everything was stained with blood.

Stein watched patiently until the thing her prize specimen was clutching appeared to be nothing more than a shapeless remnant of material. It had appeared to have been dipped in some kind of slimy red goo and dragged through a trailer full of guts and punctured organs from a butcher shop. Strange, she could get no sense of emotion, but perhaps that was because she was looking at him on a monitor rather than in person. The profile she had obtained from his brain tissue had indicated rage and fear as essential elements in his original composition, among other things. Obviously modifications from the nanos.

Suddenly he threw down what was left of the grunt and turned to the hole in the wall where the glass partition had been. Before he

could take a step towards it, Stein hit the lighted red panel in the center of the wireless console on her lap with two fingers, instantly the creature dropped to the floor as if his entire body had turned into jelly.

She sat back on the couch, the faintest hint of a smile touching her hard colorless mouth. Disrupting the electrical charge in the internal nanos as well as his central nervous system was one of those things she would have thought was just too easy. Of course, eventually it would be, which was to say, it wasn't going to work forever. The nanos along with his original system of regeneration would figure out how to adapt, and then she would have to come up with some other method of immobilizing him.

If all else failed, she could always freeze him. But that wasn't really a workable option in terms of the super-soldier project. Send a million super-soldiers into combat along with a million cryo-units and a million cryo-technicians? There were probably a couple of people in the military stupid enough to consider such a thing seriously but they weren't in charge here.

But speaking of stupid...

She used the console to trigger a silent alarm for the floor above her office, then leaned over and picked up the telephone. "Supreme Allah," she said. There was a second or two of dead silence before the call went through, which she found rather surprising, considering what time it was. The communications system shouldn't have been overloaded in the middle of the night.

"This better be good," said the deep, hoarse voice, heavy with sleep, in the phone speaker. "This better be real goddamned good."

"Well, I'm having three of your interns arrested for breaking into one of the offices," she answered coolly. "That was good for me. Was it good for you, too?"

SIXTEEN

Frustration burned in him like acid; it turned to hatred but remained trapped inside of him, which made the burning even worse. He was now secured to a plain, flat surface contained in a framework and propped up in a near-vertical position. It gave him a good view of that woman bustling around her office alone. He watched as she heaved the glass partition back into place; he would not have thought she was strong enough to do it without help.

After a while, he understood that she was showing off for him. When she finished with her office, she came into the lab and began talking to him as she moved around busily. He could sense pleasure coming from her as well as a state of excitement, even arousal. And he knew it was because of what he had done when that immobilizing force, whatever it was, had finally let go of him, at least for a little while.

That didn't make him any less hostile to her, however. Why she felt pleasure, or for that matter, anything else in her life had nothing to do with him. If she was pleased by what he was, what he did, and/or how he did it, that didn't change the fact that she was life and he was anti-life, and she had to go.

Oddly, she didn't seem to have even the faintest inkling about the unalterable state of fundamental opposition that was the essence of their existence. It was odd because there was so much that she did know, especially about him. Or rather, his genesis. She had gone poking inside his head, literally. Poking, prodding, exploring, searching for nothing in particular and anything she could find.

She had done something to him with her tools, plugged things into him that had somehow made his memory explode with pictures. Suddenly, he had been seeing people and places and events that he had never, ever wanted to see again, but she had done it all in a way so that she could look at them, too. Worse, she had figured out how she could keep them for herself so that she could see them again and again, whenever she wanted. But the worst thing of all was that she

could make him see them again and again, too. Whenever she wanted. Whether he wanted to or not.

Master-Sergeant Black Carol was one of those compact, muscular people who tend to look smaller than they actually are. She had agreed to serve as the grunts' commanding officer in the complex only after obtaining an iron-clad, unbreakable agreement from Top Command that when the assignment was completed, she would be sent, immediately and without delay, to ATA. Assassin Training Academy had been her dream from the moment she had entered the military, and she had known it would take some time for her to get there, given her education, which was zero, possibly a little less.

She was not ashamed of the fact that she had arrived at the new recruit clearinghouse utterly illiterate and ignorant of almost everything beyond the most basic social graces, malnourished and lousy with a wide variety of bugs she couldn't name. She didn't make a point of bragging about the fact that she had had to spend six months in remedial education before she qualified for boot camp. But if anyone made a point of asking, she didn't lie about it or try to gloss over anything.

This course of action did not always end up convincing some shithead who had been trying to humiliate her that she was actually worthy of respect, but it had worked pretty well on the vast majority of people she came into contact with.

These days, Master-Sergeant Carol seldom encountered anyone who treated her as if she were stupid. On those occasions when she did, however, she never took it personally. Stupid people with something to hide treated everybody like that. Even stupid people who should have been smart enough to know better, like Hyacinth Stein.

She stood at parade rest, careful to keep her face composed in the appropriate neutral but attentive expression and her eyes focused straight ahead while Hyacinth Stein tried to stare her down. The room they were in was Stein's show office, not the one where she

actually did any work. This was where she called staff meetings and had people present reports to visiting representatives from Command. It was a nice, big, airy room complete with simulated daylight that could fool anyone into thinking they weren't at least five hundred feet underground. It was able to accommodate at least two dozen people for the sake of almost any sort of formal meeting or gathering.

Right now, however, it was just the two of them. Not much in the way of a gathering, but the occasion was definitely formal. Dr Stein was formally addressing her as if she were stupid while she stood in the formal position of parade rest. Veddy, veddy formal indeed.

But nothing to take personally. If you were stupid, you got offended. But if you had a lick of sense, you got suspicious.

"I do acknowledge that you held no responsibility for the three interns currently under house arrest," Stein was saying. "And technically, you still don't. However, I feel it's necessary, considering that they were selected from the ranks of the, uh, grunts, to deal with them as military personnel."

"What is it you would like me to do with them, Dr Stein?" Carol asked, keeping her gaze fixed on a point several feet above the woman's head on the wall behind her.

"Well, nothing, actually." Stein moved slightly from side to side in Carol's lower peripheral vision, as if she were trying to force her to look down at her. "I'm just informing you of how I have decided to proceed, with the interns and with Corporal Numinen."

Carol came to full attention. "Dr Stein, with all due respect for your position as head of the project, I request that Linda Numinen be transferred from wherever you are holding her to the military station, where—"

"I thought I made it clear why I can't do that," Stein said in a maddeningly stubborn—patient voice. "The corporal has, by her actions, made herself a serious security risk. I have no other choice but to keep her in solitary confinement until further notice. Which is to say, indefinitely. Which means, in all likelihood, until the project here is finished." Pause. "There's nothing I can do. She brought this on herself."

Black Carol cleared her throat. "Ma'am, I am fully aware that Command has given you unlimited authority over every aspect of this project. However, I can guarantee that all of us grunts have pledged ourselves to live and die by a code that—"

"I only called you here as a courtesy," Stein said, her tone flat and final now. "I wasn't actually obligated to tell you anything except that I had relieved Corporal Numinen of her duties and removed her from the project. I would appreciate it if you would assign a replacement for Corporal Numinen with all due haste. Make it someone who can take the work more seriously. Or at least seriously enough to remain fully dressed."

Carol felt the silence in the room stretch and then realized belatedly that Stein was waiting for her to answer.

"Yes, ma'am," she said, keeping her tone smooth and unhurried.

"Thank you." Stein let out a long, breathy sigh. "Dismissed."

Black Carol did her best parade-ground about-face and marched out of the room. She kept marching down one hallway after another, taking the long route to Center Point where, instead of ringing for an elevator, she marched down seventy-two flights to the barracks.

Supreme Allah hung up and turned to Ramirez Gold. "That was Black Carol. She couldn't do anything, either. Not even about the grunt directly under her command."

"And no one can find out anything?" Gold said in total disbelief. "I find it impossible to believe that in a place where we're under such goddamned heavy surveillance, we actually can't find out something."

"We are the ones under surveillance, not the ones surveying," Supreme Allah told him, the tone in his voice as ominous as it was admonishing. "Count yourself fortunate that you even know where you are."

Gold looked at him sharply. "Do I? Do you? mean, really? For absolute certain?"

"Point taken," said Supreme Allah, his dark face grave. "All at once, I and I have a clear understanding as to why Gunnar Gottmund sometimes goes about this complex naked."

Gold gave a harsh laugh with no humor in it. "For that matter, why are we even bothering? Stein's probably got us bugged right now. She probably knows everything any of us have ever—"

Supreme Allah shook his head. "There are ways to tell if surveillance is all pervasive. I and I can tell you for true that it is not. And in those places where it is but should not be..." He spread his hands, smiling a little. "Where their will is, there is a way around it."

The scientist appeared alarmed. "But if you block their surveillance, they'll know. Don't you see? They'll know that we know..."

"And what will they do?" Supreme Allah was amused. "Own up to their illegal over-surveillance and demand we cooperate anyway? Surrender all privacy?" He shook his head. "No, my friend. The military will try to look and listen where it shouldn't but it will never admit to doing so any more than it would admit either to failure or success."

"And think it out a little further; who could be reviewing all this illegal surveillance? The military? Command has more immediate problems to deal with. With neither the time nor the manpower themselves, they would have to job it out. Only there is no one they could trust: no individual, no group of individuals even within the military itself. Ultimately, full-saturation surveillance would be a waste of money and resources."

"Personally, I think it's more likely that Hyacinth Stein herself would try such a thing. She has never been troubled by respect for human life. She has never actually seen people as anything other than skin bags with varying degrees of mobility."

"You're not telling me anything I don't know," Gold said darkly.

Supreme Allah dipped his head in a noncommittal way. "I should hope not, as I would be extremely upset if I were. In any case, Dr Stein has no substantial interest in people other than how they can be useful to her. If she suspected that one or more of the people in

the complex were involved in some kind of active opposition to her, she would react without hesitation.

"But just to monitor? That would mean hours of her precious time and attention squandered on skin bags other than the clones in the growth vats. If she really were willing to do that, do you think Gunnar Gottmund would still be free to trot bare-assed between the gym and his apartment?"

"You sound pretty sure of yourself." Gold frowned. "But as good as your theory is, I'm not convinced."

"I and I have more than a theory to be sure of," Supreme Allah told him. "There's hardware, too."

Gold still looked unimpressed. "Yeah? I've got hardware, too. Everybody does. Too bad we don't have any that could tell us what happened to the Sex Maniacs and their girlfriend." He made a disgusted noise. "I told you they weren't right for the job."

"Man, without the Sex Maniacs, it just doesn't feel like breakfast," Devon said.

The dismay on his face looked genuine. Zelda wasn't sure whether she felt relieved at being able to drink her coffee without having to studiously ignore the usual double-entendres flying thick and fast around her, or disconcerted by this new disappearance. Correction: absence, she told herself firmly, holding the large mug under her nose with both hands so she could savor the aroma. There was absolutely no reason to think of the Sex Maniacs' failure to show up for breakfast as a disappearance. They were merely absent, and that didn't have to mean anything sinister. Given their well-known proclivities, all it probably meant was they had decided to have breakfast in bed.

But it was kind of weird without them. Peaceful, but weird.

"All three of them," Roz said, looking thoughtfully at the empty chairs to Zelda's right. "Am I going to be the first one to say LeBlanc?"

"Who's LeBlanc?" asked the new intern. The tone of off-hand curiosity in her voice sounded false to Zelda.

"The guy you replaced," Devon told her. "Started out here with us and then one morning he was just gone, like he'd never been." Pause. "You didn't happen to run into him on his way out while you were coming in, did you?"

The new intern regarded him with a faint smile. "No. But maybe I missed him because he went out through the parking garage. I didn't bring a car, myself."

Devon sat up straight and opened his mouth to say something but Fredo talked over him. "Save it, Dev," he said, speaking just a little too loudly.

Several of the black and gold braids flew up and whipped the air as Devon's head snapped around to look at him. "I was just..."

"Forget it," Fredo told him.

Devon made a disgusted noise and turned back to the new intern. "Did you know LeBlanc?" He stuck a finger in his right ear to shut out anything else Fredo said. "Seriously, did you ever meet him?"

"How would she?" Zelda snapped impatiently. "She didn't get here until after he left."

"LeBlanc wasn't a retrained grunt, like the Maniacs," Devon said. "He came out of a civilian project. So did she..." he jerked his chin at the new intern. "So maybe she worked with him in some other lab, before we all got buried alive. Like you and Fredo."

"Leave me out of this," Fredo said tensely. "And just drop the whole thing."

Devon looked from Zelda to Fredo and back to Zelda again. "What the fuck is the problem with you two? I try to ask someone a simple question..."

"You were going to try to make some kind of major shit mountain out of the answer, no matter what it was," Fredo said. "We're all used to your paranoid fantasies but she hasn't even been here a week. I was just trying to spare her, at least for a little while. I think she had enough of your crap yesterday."

Devon sat back in his chair, looking around at everyone else with a mixture of surprise and hurt. No one else said anything; most of the

other interns had suddenly become utterly fascinated by something on the table directly in front of them. Except for Roz, who was sitting on Devon's left and had spent the entire time studying him with unabashed interest.

Finally he sensed her gaze and stared back at her. "What?" he said finally, his voice sounding both nervous and defiant.

"We could just ask Supreme Allah," she said calmly.

Devon made a single barking noise that failed to be a laugh, even a sarcastic one. "And have him lie to us?"

"How can you automatically assume he would do that?" Roz replied, calmer and more reasonable than ever. "Rastas are the most honest people I know. I don't think they're allowed to lie. It's against their religion or something."

"It's against *all* religions to lie," Galina piped up, surprising everyone. She was a tall, rangy woman with reddish-orange hair and a slightly weathered look to her skin. She seldom did more than sit with her chin on her fists and stare silently into her coffee. This morning, she was sitting next to the empty chair Alonzo usually occupied and from time to time she would glance at it sadly. "But that doesn't seem to stop anybody, even the most devout."

"But we're talking about Supreme Allah," Roz said.

"And what are you saying about him?" He propped the swinging door open with his right foot crossed casually behind his left ankle and looked around at all the startled faces with his usual air of benign authority. Zelda could see Roz in her peripheral vision and thought that it was something of a wonder that her blush wasn't actually audible.

"That you're honest," Roz blurted. "That you would always tell us the truth."

"And what do you want to know the truth about?" he asked, still benign.

Roz looked pointedly at the three empty chairs.

Supreme Allah nodded, his expression turning weary. "They are under house arrest," he said, sighing a little. "It happens when you break the rules."

Zelda could actually feel most of the tension in the room dissolve as everyone slumped virtually in unison.

"Is that all?" Supreme Allah asked, looking around again. Without waiting for an answer, he beckoned to the new intern and then, almost as an afterthought, Fredo.

"Okay, how many days in a row is that?" Devon said, after they left. "They can't really still be training her. And how does it involve Fredo all of a sudden? What's really going on?"

Ondine threw a half-eaten slice of toast at him, which triggered a general fusillade. Covering his head with both arms, Devon yelled that he was kidding, he was just kidding, goddamn it.

If he really was, Zelda thought, maybe he shouldn't have been.

Having to switch from night shift to day shift without any transition was just about the shittiest kind of deal Dan Numinen could think of. Even if he was running on the best anti-lag meds in the world, the shit quotient was unacceptable. Anti-lag would keep him going but it never completely got rid of that feeling of something nasty swirling around in the pit of his stomach. It was supposed to, that really good stuff they gave you here in the complex was supposed to smooth out all the rough edges, but it never did for him. It just kind of damped it down, more sometimes than other times. It might get very, very faint but it was still there, and the only way he could get rid of it was to sleep it off.

He really hated that feeling, that up-all-night-watery-eyes-acid-stomach feeling. There was something about it that made him feel depressed as all fucking hell, and he'd have to watch himself so that he didn't say or do something he'd be sorry for later. Like what a shitty way this was to treat him after he'd taken care of those three interns with no one to help him.

He hadn't argued with Dr Stein when she'd called and ordered him to take those guys into custody all by himself. He could have argued; arresting anybody, especially more than one person, during the commission of criminal act was one of those things you never did

without back-up, even if nobody was armed and the crime wasn't violent. And that wasn't even taking into account the fact that he shouldn't have been making the arrests in this case. If he'd discovered the crime himself, then he could have taken action right on the spot. But the crime being already in progress, he was technically supposed to call the designated MPs.

But Dr Stein had said no because she needed him to handle everything all on his own for reasons that had to do with security. The three interns had broken into the office on the floor directly above hers trying to get at the data in her files. She wanted them tranked, isolated (all in one room was fine, she said), and invisible; nothing in any of the logs about it, not a word to anyone, not even the sarge.

And he'd done just what she wanted, all the way down the line. Unlocked the control panel in the hall, sealed off the vents, and gassed them to sleep. Turned out they were those guys that everybody called the Sex Maniacs. Horniest guys Dan Numinen had ever met, that was for sure. But that was okay. It had been one of them that had come up with the subroutine for ducking out the trapdoor in the holo games. Dan Numinen had done a deal with him to put the subroutine on chips and make them available to a select clientele at a reasonable price. Either money or barter, or a combination of the two. In his experience, it paid to be flexible, both in terms of profits and in good feelings all around.

He had no good feelings about having to put the Sex Maniacs in isolation, though. Not that he hesitated to do what Dr Stein told him, or even thought of questioning her orders. But jeez, he really wished he knew what they'd done to get themselves in this kind of deep shit. If he'd still been in the barracks, he probably would have gotten wind of whatever they'd been planning and maybe he'd have been able to talk them out of it.

Or maybe they'd have talked him into it instead. Then there would have been four guys stashed away and someone else would be doing this job and enjoying his private room.

Dr Stein had given him an access code for one of the med supply rooms so he could get a gurney to transport them. Just by chance,

he'd found a mortuary cart with shelves—that had saved him from having to make three trips between the office and the isolation chamber Dr Stein had told him to use. But jeez, it sure had been hard to push that cart with three guys on it, a lot harder than he'd expected. And it was a good thing all three interns had been unconscious, because they probably wouldn't have appreciated being laid out on a mortuary cart when they were still alive.

He'd done it all, everything Dr Stein had wanted just the way she wanted, and he hadn't said so much as boo to goose. Not even boo to his face in the mirror. Just because Dr Stein had been counting on his control; she had come right out and told him so.

Right now, though, he felt like he might be reaching the limit of his control. It seemed like everything was getting so complicated. He didn't really understand the situation, and he didn't want to. Which was why it was starting to get on his nerves so bad. If he'd been feeling even halfway decent, he would have just stood there and tuned them all out. Dr Gottmund and the interns' boss, the Rasta, and Dr Stein and that new intern. Although to be fair, the new girl wasn't talking too much. It was mainly Gottmund trying to give Dr Stein a lot of shit and the Rastafarian giving them both shit. All right there in the main room of the laboratory so anyone could hear.

"How many ways do I have to put it, Gunnar?" Dr Stein looked down her nose at Gottmund as if from a great height, which was a pretty cool trick considering the guy was actually a couple inches taller than she was. Heavier, too, but Dr Stein didn't look small next to him. "I am no longer concerned about what infection this intern may or may not have given to the grunts. They have been returned to quarantine, the infection will run its course."

"But you said—"

"And I've countermanded that. We have a great deal to do and I've decided that this is not the best use of our time and resources."

"But she still brought in an infection from outside that nobody caught," insisted Gottmund. "I think that's important enough to—"

"If the infection is now contained, then no, it isn't important enough to think about." Dr Stein's lab coat rustled dryly as she folded

her arms. She had little stick arms with hardly any flesh on them. "Gunnar, listen to me: I don't care about her. Is that clear?"

Numinen glanced around furtively. The audience of scientists, interns and grunts had gotten about as big as it could get where they were now. If Gottmund wanted to go on arguing, they were all going to have to move to the gym or the swimming pool or something.

"With all due respect, doctor," Gottmund said, his tone all stiff and offended, "I've sent some of her blood down to Haddad-O'Reilly in the clinic for a preliminary analysis. It seems to me that we should also take an assortment of tissue samples as well as—"

"Take what you want," Dr Stein said, sounding blasé. "Just as long as there's enough of her left so she can do her job properly. But wait till her shift's done. I don't want us tying up anyone else any longer than we already have."

Numinen straightened up sharply as the woman suddenly turned to look at him. "You. Go back to your sergeant and tell her you'll be reporting directly to me until further notice," she ordered. "And while you're at it, remind her that I'm still waiting for Linda Numinen's replacement." She started to turn away when his name-tag snagged her attention. "Ah, you and she are both Numinen."

"She's my sister, ma'am," he said, wondering what the hell was going on with Stein all of a sudden. She knew damned well what his name was, she called him by it every day, several times a day. "My twin sister. Ma'am."

Dr Stein hesitated and then gave a careless shrug. "Doesn't matter. Just do as I told you." Pause. "Now."

"Yes, ma'am." He didn't bother with a proper about-face as he left; no one seemed to notice or care. It wasn't really anything weird, one grunt taking over another grunt's duties, not even someone replacing Linda. But after all that covert op shit he'd done for Dr Stein, he couldn't help feeling like there was something weird going on, something weird or even bad. Like someone was replacing Linda not because she had been reassigned but because something had happened to her.

His heart was beating just a little too hard and too fast for normal as he remembered what he'd found in that office with those three

interns. Nothing that looked like anything that could have belonged to Dr Stein, only a midnight blue jumpsuit, size large. Someone had worn it recently; it smelled faintly of talcum powder and natural musk, but wouldn't have fit any of them very well. It looked like it might have fit someone Linda's size, though, and she would have liked the color...

Maybe Linda was just sick, he thought, trying to will his heart to slow down even as he walked a little faster down the hallway toward the elevators. Caught a cold, maybe from somebody she had something going with. He wasn't actually privy to Linda's list of social contacts but she usually had something going with somebody.

What if it was one of those interns? Or all three?

What if they'd done something to her?

What if Dr Stein knew what they'd done? And that was why she wanted them locked away, so she could deal with them.

You'll be reporting to me until further notice.

Or she was going to let *him* do that.

Goddamn, he thought; even if he wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, he was smart enough to know he was right about Dr Stein. She really wasn't a very nice person. Thank God she liked *him*.

SEVENTEEN

I absolutely detest that moron Numinen, Stein thought, looking at the interns lying unconscious on the morgue trays. He had probably thought he'd been clever transporting all three at once, but with his limited intellect, it would never have occurred to him that the trays should have been swapped for beds, or at least gurneys. Trays were for dead lumps of flesh; they had no monitoring equipment, no place to attach even a simple IV bag or a catheter receptacle, and no proper restraints. She really should have remembered that every time she told him to do something more complicated than scratch his moron ass, she had to spell the whole thing out for him.

Just her luck that he was the only one in the complex she felt she could trust. Obviously, there was no God.

A second after the door slid shut and resealed itself, Alonzo lifted his head. "Is she gone?" he whispered.

Powell groaned. "Well, if she weren't, we'd sure know by now." He sat up, looking down at the wrist loops on the tray with distaste. "Morgue trays. I guess we know what she's got in mind for us."

Kray started to sit up and then lay down again almost immediately. "How long have we been here?"

"No idea," Powell said. "I think I've been awake the longest but I'm just guessing."

"Any guesses as to what happened to Linda?" said Alonzo, raising himself up on one elbow.

Powell shook his head. "Ask me an easy one. Like why there's obviously no surveillance in this room."

"It's an isolation cell," said Kray, speaking slowly.

"That's not an explanation," Powell replied.

"I wasn't done." Kray rolled his head around to look at him. "I'm still all fucked up from the gas. I gotta really low tolerance. I meant,

she doesn't want anyone to know we're here. She puts us under surveillance, it'll register in the system."

"She doesn't have to use the system," said Alonzo. "She can use a private frequency audio bug."

"No, it'll still show up," Kray insisted, slurring his words a little. "Security system'll pick it up And if it shows up as new, the system'll automatically query it. She doesn't want anyone to know we're here."

"You think she brought us here herself?" asked Powell. But Kray's eyes rolled upwards as his lids fluttered and closed.

Powell was only dimly aware of Alonzo saying something unintelligible in a thick, sleepy voice as everything went dark.

That ungrateful bitch. Gunnar Gottmund sat in the whirlpool with his head back and his eyes closed, trying to bring himself to a state of mind that would allow him to enjoy the feel of the water on his naked body.

That ungrateful, probably bipolar, seemingly borderline, and definitely frigid bitch. He managed to compel a blood sample from the new intern, then made Supreme Dreadlocks bring the girl right to her, in person. And what does Stein do?

Announces she doesn't give a fuck. Steps on his face right in front of the girl, her boss, and a dumbass grunt.

What he was supposed to be doing was monitoring the growth of a batch of cells Dr Bitchenstein said she had modified in some special new way. Like he was a fucking trained-ape of an intern and not the youngest doctor of molecular biology in the history of Earth II.

So fuck that. In the world according to Gunnar Gottmund, anything that an intern could do, an intern would do. He'd grabbed the first one he had run into, a slightly plump, bored-looking girl named Ondine and assigned her to baby-sit while he worked on lowering his stress. And if Bitchenstein had a problem with that, she could clone his dick and twirl on it.

"Are you waiting for Dr Gottmund, Willona?" Omar Wing asked politely.

The intern sitting on the stool by the counter looked up from the magazine she was reading on her tablet and shrugged one shoulder listlessly. "Not exactly. I mean, technically, yeah. But if you want to know the truth, he pretty much took the day off."

Wing nodded, frowning slightly. "Did he say why?"

"Not to me. He might've said something to Ondine, though."

"Oh?" Wing's frown deepened.

"He originally assigned her to baby-sit his cells. But then she had to go see Dr Tutte and Dr 3XY, SO she asked me to fill in for her."

"Has either of you told Dr Gottmund what you're doing?"

Willona's half smile was wry and knowing. "Dr Gottmund told her he doesn't want to be disturbed even if the sun goes nova." Pause. "I guess he's in a pretty bad mood about something."

"Who says there's no God?" Wing muttered under his breath with a chuckle.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. You mind if I take a look at these cells you're baby-sitting?"

"I don't, but I can't speak for anyone else." She gestured at an incubator unit a couple of feet away from her on the counter. "Pretty weird cells, I gotta tell you."

Wing popped up the screen on top of the unit. For a long moment, he just stared at the image on the display and then turned to Willona again. "When was the last time you checked this out yourself?"

"About two minutes before you got here."

"Well, I hate to tell you this but either this screen isn't working right or somebody's playing a joke on you with these so-called cells."

She slipped down off the stool and went over to look at the screen. "No, everything's fine. I thought the same thing when Ondine showed me the setup, but that's the way everything's supposed to be. If you don't believe me, which I can tell you don't, play back the log and see for yourself." She pointed at the console on the desk in the center of the room.

Wing reviewed the previous three hours backwards and forwards at varying rates of speed, more out of simple fascinated disbelief than a need for meticulous verification of what he was seeing.

"Have you seen this?" he asked Willona finally.

She looked up from the tablet again and nodded.

"And you didn't think there was anything odd about these cells?"

"Sure I did. They're chimeras, right?"

Wing hesitated. "What makes you say that?"

"You think they're hybrids? Or mules?"

"I think they're impossible."

"Yeah?" Willona gave a wry laugh and gestured at the incubator. "Tell *them* that."

"Nobody's ever been able to cross organic and inorganic matter and produce something viable. It won't work even with dead organic matter. The stuff rots."

"Preachin' to the choir, doc."

Wing frowned at her. "Pardon?"

"Sorry, just a dumb old cliché I caught from somebody, means I agree completely." Willona sighed as she shifted position on the stool and crossed her legs. "Believe me, I checked every way I could, short of cancelling the procedure and starting over. And I would have done that even if it meant putting everybody's ass in a noose, mine and Ondine's as well as GG's, except I don't know where the original smear came from." She paused, her expression becoming more troubled. "Although truth to tell, I've got a pretty good idea."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I piped in some extra capacity so I could check for the presence of any DNA, even if it was just a trace. I kept it non-invasive so I wasn't really hoping for much. But I found enough to identify."

"And whose is it?" asked Wing.

"Nobody we know. Which means it has to belong to that creature Stein's got hidden."

Wing raised one eyebrow sceptically. "It's a little late for her to try hiding something everybody knows about."

"What she's got isolated, then. She's got three adjoining isolation cells locked down. Contents unregistered and inaccessible. And yeah,

she can get away with that," Willona added, seeing the look on his face. "Nobody else can, just her."

"The three interns—"

"Yeah, I thought of them, too," she said. "Three interns, three isolation cells. Which is why I was checking the DNA in the first place. It's not from any of the Sex Maniacs. If she's got them in isolation, the only thing she's done to them so far is make them celibate."

"I'll be very surprised if she stops there," Wing murmured, mostly to himself.

"Choir," Willona said. "You want me to do anything?"

Wing shook his head. "Not right at the moment. As a matter of fact, I've got some work to do in here and it's going to take me a while. Why don't you check in with Supreme Allah, see if he's got somebody desperate for a little help? I can keep an eye on this. If you see Ondine before I do, tell her I'll square everything with Gunnar."

She thanked him and left, taking her tablet with her.

"Oh, no, Willona, thank you," he murmured, turning back to the impossible cells.

The disadvantage of using the isolation cells as her base, Stein thought as she unpacked the first of the two cases she had brought in, was having to do so much herself. At least she could use that moron Numinen as a pack animal. And now that he was in service to her exclusively, she didn't have to worry about him running his mouth around any of his grunt pals and accidentally letting something slip. Or accidentally hearing some rumor about Linda that might have disturbed him.

Numinen could do a lot of the heavy lifting and hauling for her but she had to take care of a lot of scutwork, like cleaning, all by herself. She couldn't have him cleaning up blood and fragments of tissue and still expect him to believe that those three interns were just sitting safe and untouched in solitary confinement even though he hadn't

seen her bring in any skin bags from the cloning area. Even his stupidity had its limits.

Despite the tedium, though, cleaning wasn't so bad. She had thought it would take forever to mop up Linda Numinen's remains and she had managed to get that done in good time. Even sealing the blood-stained breakage for disposal in proper Hazmat receptacles hadn't taken as long as she had thought it would. The detail of grunts had collected and removed the stuff without question or comment, just like they did with any other hazardous materials.

She spread the contents of the first case out on the workspace that ran the length of the back wall. Mostly surgical instruments, freshly sterilized and ready to use again, along with some small-area neutralizers that would allow her to make incisions at will in various places on the monster's body without interfering with his general immobility.

Today she was going back into his skull, which alone called for three neutralizers just to keep all the tissue permeable. His body had the capacity to learn and adapt on a sub-cellular level; every time she made an incision, it would heal slightly faster and it became that much more difficult to repeat the same procedure later.

The time would come, she knew, when the neutralizers wouldn't be able to counteract the defenses set up by the nanos in his system; when that happened, she wouldn't be able to cut him open with a power saw the size of a planet. If she didn't come up with a way to get around that soon, she was going to find herself permanently locked out of this magnificent creature.

The idea had come to her while she had been cleaning up the last of what she had kept of Linda Numinen. There had been just enough skin and bone to try grafting some onto the creature. No luck at all. At first, Numinen's cells would seem to take, settling right into the creature's tissue. Then the creature's tissue would eradicate it, breaking it down so that she couldn't detect any residue even on the sub-molecular level.

Exactly why this had caused her mind to leap to the idea of reprogramming the nanos *in situ* was unclear to her; not that it was something she really cared to agonize over. For that matter,

reprogramming wasn't quite the right word. It was more like retuning; making a few modifications that weren't designed to contradict their original functions, just give her a little control over them, as and when.

Adding her own nanos had been a waste of time; the creature's own mechanisms had automatically absorbed them, presumably using the extra material to reproduce.

The thing to do, she decided, was to focus on Control Central and the only thing that the creature was short on: higher brain function.

There was some gray matter but less than she had ever seen in the skull of any human and not even enough for her to make a vague guess as to how it might be organized. The nano mechanisms obviously hadn't been programmed to make any enhancements there.

But if there was more of it, there was a very good chance that they would adapt and learn how to respond to it. Even take orders from it.

Of course, considering the creature's size and the multitude of nanos it contained, it would probably take a lot more than the average amount of gray matter.

She moved to the second case, which was an oversized cooler, and touched the front with a fingertip. It de-opaques instantly, showing her each brain afloat in each of the three fluid-filled compartments. She was more interested in what it said on the tablets they were wired into. According to the readings, they were all still in sleep. Stein smiled. So far, so good; she could count on at least another thirty minutes before they had to be re-set. That was fine with her; let them dream while they could. state of REM

She picked up a couple of neutralizers and turned to the creature on the operating table. "I'd make a witty comment," she told him, but I think I'll wait till later when you can actually appreciate it.

Of everything that had ever happened to him everything anyone had ever done to him, this was the worst, and he could remember it

all. Not the way people, the loathsome living, remembered

, of

what they called the past, not as what had been but as what he was. Everything that ever happened to him, everything that anyone had ever done to Jason Voorhees was Jason Voorhees. Always.

Even back in the space ship, when the nanos had flooded into him and taken over the regeneration process, picking up all the pieces and putting him back together in an improved and enhanced state, he had remained Jason Voorhees. Even when they had rebuilt him again from the charred fragment and the muck at the bottom of the lake, he was Jason Voorhees.

And even now, with his head split open and this woman packing this living tissue, this garbage, into his skull, he was still Jason Voorhees, still anti-life. But in spite of his fury at this violation, the mechanisms inside of him remained inert.

He knew there was some kind of force at work that interfered with them and paralyzed them which in turn paralyzed him—and somehow the woman was doing it, the same way she was changing something in the composition of his body so she could cut into him.

But both his body and the mechanisms were adapting, evolving to counter her instruments and tools, so she would have to change the settings, make them stronger or make new devices. Eventually, she would run out of settings and none of her devices would have any effect on him; that was inevitable. She seemed perfectly content to ignore this, to go on doing whatever it was she did as if she were always going to be more powerful than he was. It made no difference, though, what she knew

about him, what she thought she knew about him, what she wished or hoped she was going to find out about him. He would simply wait

for the time when he could finally just reach out and put a stop to her and her life. It was what he was.

But now she was forcing pieces of life into him. The fury inside of him should have overcome anything, everything at work on him. His rage should have broken his restraints and put her skull in his hands.

Abruptly, he felt the surface he was lying on tilting forward, raising him up almost to a standing position. The woman moved around to stand in front of him.

"I'm going to leave the transplanted material hooked up to life-support for another hour. Then we'll see how the graft between your brain and the new tissue is progressing." She gave him a long, searching gaze as she stripped off her gloves one at a time and dropped them on the floor. "Work with me on this."

The insult of the living matter pressed into him.

EIGHTEEN

"Where's Dr Gold?" Lynne asked, hoping the question came off as politely interested rather than nosy or impertinent.

"He didn't deign to tell me," Omar Wing replied as he set a small white, insulated box (Kool-Karry—It's YOUR Lunch, the slightly faded red lettering across the side exclaimed) on the workbench. "But whatever it is, it probably won't cheer him up, either." He winked, which jerked a startled laugh out of her.

"I'm sorry," she said, putting a hand over her mouth briefly. "I didn't know if he looked that way to me just because I'm new—"

"No, it's not just you," Wing said genially. "He looks suicidal to everyone. You get used to it after you've been here a while but you never stop noticing."

"I'm sorry," Lynne said again. "I really shouldn't laugh." She was trying not to but now that she had started she was finding it somewhat difficult to stop.

Wing gave her a mock solemn look. "Maybe not, but if you don't, your face might freeze like that, too."

She covered her mouth again, laughing harder. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said when she could finally speak.

"Stop apologizing," he told her. "You haven't done anything wrong yet." He paused and his gaze fell on the stasis chambers she had filled the day before. "Who are those from?"

Her laughter dried up almost instantly. "The soldiers in quarantine. Dr Gold took them before the virus showed itself. Dr Haddad-O'Reilly scanned them and they're not infected."

"Weird." He turned to look at her speculatively. "Doesn't that strike you as weird?"

"About as weird as Dr Gottmund insisting that I was the infecting agent," Lynne said honestly. "I don't see how I could have gotten in carrying a virus without it being detected."

"Well, there are viruses and there are viruses." Wing grabbed an empty tray from a cabinet under the counter and began putting the stasis chambers on it, waving her back when she went to help him.

"We're starting to see dormant forms like nothing we've ever seen before. You could almost swear that somebody's teaching them encryption." He finished loading the tray and set it down at the far end of the counter. "And while we're on the subject of unprecedented, I've got a little change to our regularly scheduled day in the cloning lab."

"I had a feeling that wasn't really your lunch," Lynne said as he opened the box.

"And you're right." Wing lifted a small round covered dish out of the box with both hands. "Do you know why this is called a Petri dish?" he asked her.

Lynne shook her head.

"Me, neither. It's one of those silly things from Prevac Earth where the name survived but the story behind it seems to be lost. Stuff like that drives me crazy." He chuckled.

"What is it?" Lynne asked. She could see something that looked like a small section of black spider web in the center of the dish.

"I'm going to cultivate it and find out." He jerked his chin toward the vat area. "Open number five for me, will you?"

Number five was right next to the one that had contained the boy. She had been immensely relieved when she had come in and seen that Gold had been telling her the truth yesterday. Or at least mostly the truth. The adult male occupying the vat may not have had the child's prettiness but he was far from unattractive. Not hard to look at, which was why she still found him hard to look at. Even if not quite as hard to look at as a child. She kept her back to the vat as she prepped the vacant one for Wing, hoping that when she came in tomorrow, he'd be gone.

And then you'll just have to look at another one, she thought as Wing placed the dish in a circular recess in the bed. Or two. Or more.

"You can close now," he said, nodding at the control panel on her left. Lynne did so, watching as the curved transparent cover slid up from the foot of the vat. As soon as it locked itself into place, Lynne was amazed to see the top of the Petri dish begin to vanish as if something were eating it away from the center.

"Usually this stuff's not very exciting to watch, unless you're entertained by watching paint dry," Wing said.

"Usually?" Lynne asked. "You think this might be different because you don't know what it is?"

"I've set up extra continuous monitoring." He pointed at the ceiling directly above the vat. "Just in case."

"Doesn't the vat have a real-time log as well?"

Wing nodded. "I want pictures that are already pictures, not just reams of data I have to reformat. I don't have anything else for you here, so you might as well go back to Supreme Allah and see who he's got begging for help." He moved around the end of the vat and then paused, looking down at the mature male in the one next to it. "LeBlanc, we hardly knew you."

"That's LeBlanc?" Lynne blurted, looking from the clone to Wing and back again several times.

"LeBlanc's clone, yes," Wing said.

"But I thought he was gone." Lynne took a step back from the thing, feeling more disconcerted than ever without really knowing why.

"Yes, but he left his tissue samples behind. We all have tissue samples on file here." Wing frowned. "Didn't they take any from you yet?"

"Just some blood." She put a hand over the crook of her arm. "And only because Dr Gottmund thought I was Patient Zero."

"Well, they'll get around to it, I'm sure."

"What do they plan to do with it?" she asked, following him back to the other part of the lab.

He shrugged. "That's up to Dr Stein."

"But I thought it was against the law to clone someone in their absence, even as a skin-bag, except where there's an imminent loss of life."

"Dr Stein has a dispensation. But only for civilians. The military wouldn't go so far as to let her cultivate cells from any of their personnel." Pause. "Unless, of course, they're dead. Then she can do what she wants."

"But what if—"

Wing interrupted her with a heavy sigh. "Come on, now, I know you're new but I didn't think you were fresh out of a Petri dish yourself. Dr Stein does whatever she feels is necessary. Now get back to Supreme Allah and pick up another assignment. We're shorthanded, remember?"

Hyacinth Stein looked from the three corpses stacked on the morgue trays to the mess she had found when she had opened up the specimen's skull. Very disheartening, this; now she had to write off three interns and God only knew how long it was going to take to get replacements for them. Then the replacements would have to be trained, which would take even more time. It seemed to her as if the whole project had suddenly taken a wrong turn and gone off course, so that it was no longer heading for a successful conclusion but a state of complete chaos.

That happened sometimes, she knew. Not to Hyacinth Stein, of course; it never, ever happened to her. Because whenever she embarked on any sort of project, she always made sure that she had virtual total control over everything in it and around it. All her decisions were final; her word was law. No appeal, no reprieve and no arguments.

Now if only the personnel could have been handled the same way. Assistants that could have been stored like instruments and tissue samples when not in use. When she did need them, she could have just pressed a button to wake them up, program them to do what they were supposed to, and then, when they had carried out their tasks, all she would have to do was deactivate them and put them away till the next time she needed them.

Nothing to do with them now but sample their tissue and grow a few skin-bags. That didn't replace the interns but at least it would provide some more organs for later experiments. You could never have too many spare organs in Hyacinth Stein's experience.

But damn it, this should have worked, she thought stubbornly. The internal nanos plus the specimen's own auto-regeneration should

have combined to modify the transplanted brain tissue and produce an organ that would give the creature enough higher brain function so that she would be able to communicate with it. Instead, the creature's body had completely overwhelmed and consumed the donor brain matter. As near as she could tell, anything that had not simply been absorbed into the creature's body had been converted to the viscous ooze that served as blood, and then expelled through any convenient channel. Black gunk dribbled out of the specimen's ears and dripped from the edges of the mask-like face.

Well, at least she knew one thing for certain: there was absolutely no possibility of foreign tissue surviving in the creature.

Stein closed the creature's skull and prepared to take tissue samples from the dead interns for cultivation in the clone lab. Just as she uncovered the first one, her gaze came to rest on what was left of his cranium and she had an inspiration.

Just because the specimen was a lousy host didn't mean that its material couldn't be hosted by another body.

In particular, one of these bodies.

Quickly, she inspected their heads and decided the one named Kray was in the best condition. She swivelled his tray out and positioned him side by side with her specimen.

She started to prepare a tray of surgical instruments and paused. Opening her specimen's head up all over again was not detrimental to his condition since absolutely nothing interfered with the regenerative process. The problem was that after each regeneration, she had to re-tune and strengthen the field that kept him immobile. It was as if all the nanos in his body underwent a special kind of change in response to this regenerative activity. More than that, each change seemed to be building on the one that had occurred before, as if they were following the particular steps of a process.

But every time she tried to examine the process and identify at least one or two of the elements, she could find no tangible evidence in the nanos themselves. Individually, they had not changed at all. It was only their behavior in groups that had altered but she could find no reason for it.

Unless, of course, she wanted to give herself over completely to the fantasies of clinical paranoia. Then she could explain everything very easily; the specimen's body was possessed by a force that could not only convert the nanos for its own purposes but was also capable of concealing the exact nature of the process.

Standing between the specimen on the table and the corpse on the morgue tray, she replayed her thoughts and suddenly felt herself seized by a weariness so intense that she was tempted to stretch out on the counter and go to sleep. Instead, she left the morgue tray where it was, checked to make sure that the specimen was adequately restrained, and then went to the unoccupied isolation cell next door.

The nano repair bed had been recently installed and its reservoirs freshly charged with new medical nanos. Stein set a program for therapeutic maintenance and restorative sleep and climbed aboard. It wasn't really that she wanted to waste time resting but she knew as well as anyone that medication and enhancers would only take a person so far. Beyond a certain point, the human organism could not go on without genuine sleep.

Even so, she might have tried anyway, if the specimen had still been quartered in the laboratory next to her office. But now that she had moved everything to isolation, her beautiful monster was completely secure and inaccessible. She could allow herself the luxury of a few hours of sleep, plus a medical tune-up. When she woke up, she would be better than ever.

It occurred to her briefly that she would probably also be sorry she had let those three corpses sit and rot instead of taking care of them beforehand. Well, screw it, as the kids were always saying. After she got up, she would simply toss a bunch of nanos in to clean up the dead bodies and move her specimen to a different cell, where the air was fresher.

Neither Hyacinth Stein nor anyone else in the installation was familiar with a certain Pre-Evacuation Earth I entertainer who had

enjoyed a very colorful and macabre career using the stage name Alice Cooper. Had Jason Voorhees himself had anything approaching the standard human associative thought process, Alice Cooper probably would not have meant anything to him, either, because Alice pre-dated him by well over a decade. Jason's brief childhood had not exposed him to rock music, MTV or flamboyant singers plastered in face paint.

It is possible, on the other hand, that Alice Cooper might have heard something of the legend of Jason Voorhees. But that had been over five hundred years ago and on another planet, which makes speculation an exercise in futility at the very least.

In any case, long before Jason had first picked up a machete, Alice Cooper had been alarming parents and religious groups just by making records. Sex and violence figured heavily in the subject matter; one notorious song was a clever if somewhat unsettling declaration of non-platonic love for the literally dead.

Those who had objected to the very idea five hundred years before would have blanched considerably at what was occurring in the isolation cell that Hyacinth Stein had left unattended. Alice Cooper probably wouldn't have liked it much, either.

Of course, what happened while Hyacinth Stein slept had nothing to do with love, either for the dead or anyone else. There was a scientific explanation but that only covered the sheer mechanics of the process. That was only *what* happened, not why.

Had Stein actually been there to observe, she would have cobbled together some sort of scientific justification, and she would have been way off. Given a million years to contemplate the circumstances, she probably would never have come close to grasping the existence of anti-life.

As the embodiment of anti-life, Jason Voorhees was not moved to feel more kindly toward the bodies of his victims once he had eradicated the life within. But being shut in and immobilized with

three dead bodies was not the same kind of ordeal as having to endure Hyacinth Stein.

He was aware of decay and the absence of any regeneration. Decay, rot, putrefaction—deep within all the invincible new material that had been modified and fashioned into a new, better, stronger body, beyond the reality of the nanos that had done the work, this was the essence of Jason Voorhees as anti-life. Rot that was ongoing and eternal, in direct opposition to growth and renewal.

Eventually, Jason's essence stirred in response to the proximity of active deterioration. Nothing else might have happened; it all might have ended right there except for the nanos in Jason's body. They were learning how to counter the force that paralyzed them but they were still unable to neutralize it so that the host could move unhindered.

However, they could sense the nearby presence of matter somewhat similar to the host's, and it was not subject to any paralyzing force. A portion of the nanos in Jason's body had achieved some autonomous movement, even though they were unable to move him. They had stayed where they were simply because there was nowhere else to go.

But there was now.

They flowed out of Jason onto the edge of the table and began to spin a bridge to the morgue tray.

Wing tried changing the settings on the vat in several different ways, to no avail. The cells in the Petri dish had reached what seemed to be predetermined threshold beyond which they just did not develop. They didn't grow, but they didn't actually die altogether. It was as if they were waiting for an additional stimulus of some kind and apparently they were capable of waiting forever, if necessary.

This was crazy. There was no substance that behaved like this. But then, there was no substance like this, period.

He stood over the vat and stared down at it with his arms folded. The thing to do now was to take the stuff out of the vat and put it

back where he had found it. Or maybe take it to Gottmund and ask him what the hell he thought he was pulling. No point to tying up a vat when they could have been growing something useful in it.

He moved past the LeBlanc Tousignant clone and paused. Technically, the correct term was skin-bag, since it had no real brain, but he couldn't bring himself to apply it to a familiar face. Goddamn Stein and her insistence on saving money and resources. It wasn't really that much more expensive to introduce a developmental scrambling element so that the cloned material wouldn't look like a viable human being. Sometimes he thought Stein was being morbid rather than frugal. Morbid and sadistic. He wouldn't have put it past her.

He looked around the room at the other vats. About half of them were occupied now, all of them immature. Which is to say, they look like children, he told himself silently. Don't dance around it with double-talk. "The organism is still at an immature stage of development. It will achieve adult form by tomorrow morning." They look like sleeping children, and it's obscene.

His tablet chimed then, startling him. He was even more surprised to read a message from Cosi Fan Tutte on the screen, telling him he should come to her office right away.

On waking up to find that she was female this morning, XX XY had written herself a note about the folly of impulsive hair cutting before dressing and heading straight over to Cosi Fan Tutte's office, only to find it empty. According to the locator on her tablet, she had opted for breakfast. Figured, XX thought, resigned, and turned to look at the wall monitor.

Since Stein had removed her monster to the ultra-privacy of isolation, there was no more up-to-date information to be had on her prize organic-inorganic creature. There was, however, plenty of previously unseen information, XX saw as she moved closer to the screen. Tutte had decided to take advantage of Stein's continuing

absence to graduate from tapping her buffers to exploring her files in-depth.

This was a move that XX really had not expected, partly because of Tutte's own ethical and moral misgivings about invading anyone's privacy, even if it was Stein's, but mostly because it was difficult to conceal that much activity except on a very superficial level. Any record of intrusion could be easily erased from the buffer if you couldn't simply wait for it to scroll away all on its own, as it would do eventually, but the internal log was a different matter. The code was permanently etched into the infrastructure of the file space itself, readable as an event log via a rather complex subroutine. The resultant output was not in any way easy to digest at a glance, even for those with a great deal of experience in numerical interpretation.

On the other hand, it didn't take a lifetime of expertise in the field to spot variations in values that had previously been holding steady. That alone was a sign that something out of the ordinary had occurred and in the absence of some sort of power failure due to earthquake or other large-scale disaster, the occurrence was guaranteed to be an intrusion of some kind. All Hyacinth Stein had to do was take a close look at the log for her file space and she would know.

However, it was highly unlikely that Stein would be auditing any file activity records in the near future, XX realized, chuckling silently to herself. Not in the near future and possibly not even in the middle-distant future; not while she had her dream specimen to fuss over and experiment with.

And it just so happened that Stein's dream specimen was the subject of all the data on Cosi Fan Tutte's wall monitor. XX picked up the remote control from the desk and divided the screen into two windows so she could look over the information that had already been collected from Stein's files.

Five minutes later, she was putting a call out on Tutte's speed messaging system.

NINETEEN

Lynne had told herself that she was on her way to Supreme Allah's office to pick up a new assignment even after she got on the elevator and pressed the button for the clinic level. Even as the elevator made its painfully slow descent, she continued to tell herself that the better course of action was to do as Omar Wing had told her. She had to go through the motions, build up her presence as an ordinary intern; then she would be able to move around without arousing anyone's suspicions.

The elevator finally crawled to a stop and the doors opened promptly, as if this were a highspeed express lift. She poked her head out to look up and down the hallway. No one there. Apparently this area of the installation didn't see a lot of traffic.

Now get back on that elevator and go to Supreme Allah's office, she told herself as she headed for the clinic. What makes you think you're going to get past the first airlock? And even if you do, you haven't even come up with an obviously lame excuse as to why you're here, probably because you still haven't figured out what the hell you're actually going to do. Look at Sofira and wait for her to open her eyes again? And what'll you do if she does? Slap a medicated patch on her so the two of you can bust out of there?

Then she was standing in front of the entrance to the clinic and although she still didn't have a clue as to what she should do next, she couldn't bring herself simply to turn around and walk away. She rang for admittance.

For all of a second, nothing happened and she was suddenly seized by the strong feeling that she had just done exactly the wrong thing.

Then she heard the seal on the door release and a querulous male voice said, "It's about damn time!"

There was no chance for her to dwell on how self-conscious she felt in a full body condom on this visit. The nurse barely glanced at her

while he rushed through a sketchy explanation of how to read the monitoring equipment, or rather, how to tell if something was wrong with one of the patients before he left practically at a run, leaving her there by herself.

She surveyed the room full of unconscious soldiers with confusion and trepidation tightening in the pit of her stomach. What if something did go wrong with one of them? Or, even worse, more than one? What had he said to do if any of them seemed to be waking up? She tried to remember but her mind had very helpfully gone blank on her.

While she was still trying to decide whether she should panic or not, a chime sounded from the main console. It took her a moment to figure out that someone else was ringing for admittance, and another second or two before she located the monitor and saw that it was Fredo.

"I didn't know there would be two of us holding things down here while the grown-ups have their big secret meeting," Fredo told her.

"Me, neither," Lynne replied truthfully. "Is something going on?"

"Looks that way." He ambled over to the nearest patient and checked the small read-out screen on the panel at the foot of the bed.

"I don't suppose you know what it is," she said, tentatively hopeful as she followed him.

"No, but with any luck we'll be able to find out." He glanced at her with an enigmatic near-smile.

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. Every inch of this place is bugged, you know..." He paused at the foot of the next bed to look at her again. "You did know that, didn't you?"

"I figured it would be."

"And I mean every inch: showers, toilets, bedrooms. There's nowhere they're not listening and watching." Pause. "Except for the isolation area, where Dr Stein is hiding out."

"Let me guess; that was her idea?"

"I don't honestly know," Fredo admitted, laughing a bit sheepishly. "But that sounds about right."

"So if someone's always watching everything that goes on here, why is anyone actually bothering to have a secret meeting?"

Fredo shook his head. "I said the whole place is bugged. I didn't say someone was always watching."

Lynne raised her eyebrows. "Now I'm confused."

He smiled at her in a kindly way and in spite of everything, she felt her heart suddenly skip a beat. Stop that, she scolded herself fiercely; this isn't an undergraduate chem lab and he's not some cute grad student instructor. But she still couldn't stop herself from checking out his butt as he moved on to the next bed.

"The whole place is under surveillance but it doesn't mean that anyone is actually looking. I mean, it is possible to call up a time-stamped record for any area of the installation—your room, for example, or mine—and find out what was going on at the time. But no one will unless there's a good reason. Like, if I were found dead in my room, for example."

"You sound pretty sure about that," Lynne said sceptically. "I would have thought they'd have Als watching all the time, alerting someone to anything they were programmed to find suspicious."

Fredo laughed. "Als? You have to be joking. Sure, they had them here at the beginning, but they kept flashing up alerts all the time. And the face recognition programs were so poor they couldn't tell that someone in a full body condom was the same person as in their normal clothes. No, the Als were just too damned *unintelligent*, too stupid, to carry on using them. So it's only humans that can actually watch any of the surveillance. And you can be pretty sure no one is actually bothering to do that most of the time."

She looked past him toward the end of the row, wondering what she would do this time if Sofira opened her eyes again. "You mean they respect our privacy? I wish I could share your faith that the nobler aspects of human nature will prevail."

He gave a hard laugh. "Nobler aspects have absolutely nothing to do with it. Nobody's going to look because nobody's got the time. Not even Hyacinth Stein. Sure, she's paranoid enough that the whole idea

of privacy is, at best, a personal affront to her, and at worst, which is probably ninety percent of the time, a plot by her enemies to destroy her. But she doesn't care to spend a single moment doing anything that doesn't directly contribute to the greater glory of Hyacinth Stein."

"Accidental virtue," Lynne muttered, barely aware that she was speaking aloud.

"Hey, if that's the only kind available, why turn your nose up at it? I certainly wouldn't." Fredo chuckled.

"Point taken," said Lynne. "So does this blanket surveillance deal have something to do with how you're going to find out what all the, uh, grown-ups are up to?"

Fredo smiled over his shoulder at her. "Say, you're not really a grunt, are you?"

"What would make you ask me something like that?" Lynne blinked at him.

"I don't know." His smile turned apologetic. "A number of the interns here are retrained grunts. I'm not, and Supreme Allah said LeBlanc's replacement was also non-military. But just now, when you asked me about 'blanket surveillance', I suddenly flashed on you having some kind of military experience."

"Well, I don't." Lynne did her best to keep her tone light, in spite of the fact that she felt as if she weren't being entirely truthful with him. "I've never been in the military, never even gave a thought to enlisting, even when I was going through my phase of wanting to be a star-ship commander back in the depths of my painful adolescence. Hell, I don't even know anyone in the uh, who did something like that," she finished lamely, hoping he wouldn't notice her momentary floundering. Which was completely stupid, anyway. Why the hell was she so jumpy about telling a lie all of a sudden? She was living a lie just by being in the installation at all.

It was the idea of lying to him, she realized. She didn't want to actively lie to him or any of the other interns, military or not. They didn't deserve that, and depending on what she found out here, they weren't going to like the idea that they had had a spy in their ranks...

What makes you so sure there hasn't been one all along, a small voice in her mind whispered suddenly? It made sense. If Stein really was so paranoid, why wouldn't she have planted someone among the interns to act as her eyes and ears?

"Are you all right?"

Lynne looked up at Fredo sharply. "Pardon?"

He motioned for her to lift her chin slightly as he studied her face for a long moment. "You just about turned green all of a sudden. Like you were going to be violently sick. Which, I'm sure I don't have to tell you, is an extremely undesirable thing to do when you're wearing a full-body condom."

A small surge of self-consciousness cut through the anxiety pressing hard on her stomach and for a moment, she actually felt mildly amused at herself. In the middle of a serious, even dangerous situation, she thought, the intrepid girl reporter could still spare a couple of seconds to wonder if wearing a full-body condom made her ass look big.

"I'm fine," she told Fredo quickly.

"Are you sure? You know, sometimes, the nano-filters in the headpiece get clogged and before you know it, you're dizzy and—"

"I'm fine," she said again, taking a deep breath and letting it out again. "No problem with the air filters, I'm not going to throw up or faint or anything. Really."

Fredo stood back from her, tilting his head to one side. "Then what are you so worried about?"

"The grown-ups and their big secret meeting," she replied before she could think better of it.

He gave a short laugh. "Yeah, me too, a little."

"What do you think it's about?" Lynne asked him.

"The Sex Maniacs," he said promptly. "I think something happened to them. Maybe the same thing that happened to LeBlanc." He shrugged. "But we'll see. Zelda said she'd buzz me when she got the tap set up."

"Zelda's tapping the meeting?" Lynne was honestly surprised. "How?"

Fredo sighed. "Don't ask me, I've got no head whatsoever for gadgets." He paused suddenly and his serious expression deepened as he looked at her. "You know, I'm really surprised that Supreme Allah didn't tell me he was sending you down here as well. He doesn't usually forget to mention if two or more of us are sharing an assignment."

"Maybe the big emergency meeting's got him distracted," Lynne suggested.

Fredo was about to say something else when the phone buzzed. "Ah, the hot line is up and operational." He all but ran back to the front desk.

"This doesn't make any sense," Ramirez Gold said for what Wing thought could easily have been the millionth time.

"What makes sense to you isn't at issue here," XX XY snapped. Cosi Fan Tutte put a restraining hand on his, no, Wing corrected himself, *her* arm. Sometimes it was hard to keep up with XX XY'S shifting persuasions, especially when you couldn't even go by the haircuts. "The issue is, Stein's got some kind of large and extremely dangerous creature hidden in the isolation area and as soon as it got here, people began to go missing." She looked around at everyone else in Tutte's office. "I say we hit the panic button and evacuate. Now."

"And I say we better make goddamned sure that thing doesn't follow us out before we do anything, said Haddad-O'Reilly. She was standing to the right of the wall monitor with the remote control in her hand. She pointed it at the screen and brought up two separate analyses: one from Hyacinth Stein's files and the one Stein had received from the government anti-terrorist agency on New Harvard letterhead. She activated the laser pointer to indicate the latter. "This is a complete description of the creature as it was when Braithwaite Lowe and his merry band of college kids pried it out of the cryo chamber on Earth I. He was already dangerous *before* the nanos ever

got near him. Our technology didn't make him like this; it just gave him an upgrade and a little makeover."

"But it doesn't make any..." Gold caught himself as everyone in the room turned to glare at him. "It's scientifically impossible is what I mean!" he said, almost wailing. "Don't any of you understand that? All of that so-called data on that screen is scientifically impossible!"

"Yeah?" said Haddad-O'Reilly, sticking her fist on her hip. "Then why don't you go tell Stein that her pretty little monster doesn't really exist?"

"I'm not saying it doesn't exist, I'm saying all that is bullshit!" Gold waved at the monitor. "Either it's just a load of crap planted by Stein herself to throw us off or it's an encryption we can't read properly."

Wing was disconcerted to find that everyone had suddenly turned to look at him now, as if he actually had some sort of expert knowledge. He grimaced at them all and shrugged. "Well, I suppose that's a possibility..."

"Ha!" Gold declared, absurdly triumphant.

"But either way," Wing went on, giving him a dirty look, "it doesn't change the fact that we've got a hostile of unknown origin on the premises, and Dr Stein seems to be the only person who knows how to exercise any sort of control over it."

"What about Gunnar?" piped up Supreme Allah.

"What about him?" said XX contemptuously. "I wasn't about to call him in on this so he could run off and tell teacher."

"No, but he might know something more about this monster," Supreme Allah replied with his usual calm patience.

XX opened her mouth to argue but Wing cut her off. "No, Supreme Allah's right," he said. "Believe it or not, Gunnar really might know something." He told them about the organic-inorganic cells he had appropriated from Gunnar's lab and planted in one of the cloning vats. "I wanted to see what they were going to grow into, if anything."

His words seemed to hang in the air. Everyone was looking at him again, each of their faces a mirror of his own dawning horror as he realized what he had done. For some unmeasured time, he felt as if he were both frozen in place and falling from a great height. He tried to say something else but all at once Haddad-O'Reilly was yanking

him off the cabinet he had been half-sitting on and shoving him toward the door.

"Goddamn it, Omar, get your ass down to the lab and abort those fucking things right now before the fucking crop comes up!"

Sofira! Lieutenant Sofira, please, wake up and look at me!"

Down at the front of the room, Fredo kept checking all the read outs to make sure that all the rest of the soldiers were receiving the same dosage of stimulant at the same rate. What he and Lynne were doing carried enough penalties to put them both away for three lifetimes at the very least. But that didn't scare him anywhere nearly as much as the story Lynne had dropped on him combined with what they had heard via Zelda's tap.

Zelda herself was on her way to crash the party in Cosi Fan Tutte's office which was Lynne's idea. Get them all down to the clinic, she'd told Zelda, while she and Fredo started waking up the calvary. Or was it "cavalry"? He could never remember which was right.

I'm giddy on adrenalin, he thought; he had to steady himself. What was it Zelda was always saying? Get a grip. But how? This was crazy. What Lynne had told him about Three Mile Island simply could not have happened. She had to have been making it up. Only, here were all the soldiers and Stein had that creature...

"Rena, please! Open your eyes!" Lynne was shouting.

Fredo turned to see that she had the soldier sitting up in bed now, although her movements were still sluggish and uncoordinated. Lynne had insisted on waking her ahead of all the rest of them, even though Fredo could see that she was really only the second-highest ranking officer. But Lynne either knew her better than the others, or thought the woman would know more about what to do. Maybe she'd been one of the more resourceful grunts during the events Lynne had run very rapidly past him at Three Mile Island. Certainly, if the incident had been as bad as Lynne had told him, anyone who had survived had to be pretty resourceful, or just unbelievably lucky. He wondered which Lynne had been.

He wasn't quite clear on that and he didn't really want to be. He had a very strong feeling that in this particular situation, understanding was not going to increase his chances of living through it.

"Fredo," Lynne called, "help me get her up on her feet and walk her around."

He took a quick look at the read outs and then ran down to where Lynne had her shoulder under the other woman's right arm. He moved in on the other side, catching her before she could slump to the floor and slung her left arm over his shoulders. Her head bobbed up as she turned to look at him in groggy surprise.

"Hi, I'm Fredo," he said lamely. "I'm a friend of Lynne's, too."

"...tenant... Sofira..." she mumbled faintly and started to go out again. Then all at once she jumped, startled and turned to look at him again, this time in groggy suspicion. "'S'that you? You pinch my ass?" she demanded.

"No, Sofira, it was me," Lynne said urgently as they began walking her toward the front of the room. "Wake up or I'll do it again."

"Double-devil-dog dare ya," Sofira said, wagging her head slowly from side to side. "Kill ya."

"You gotta be awake to kill anything," Lynne told her. "Come on, Sofira. Wake up. We're in trouble here."

Fredo could feel the soldier's legs becoming steadier and stronger. "*Kinda* trouble?" she asked Lynne, her words a little less slurred now.

"Like at the power station," Lynne said. "That thing is back."

"Creature?" The soldier's body suddenly stiffened in the curve of Fredo's arm as more of her weight shifted to her own feet. "Killer?"

"They captured it and brought it here with you," Lynne said urgently.

"Here?" The other woman tried to look around.

"Some government project. You've been unconscious for over two weeks," Fredo put in.

"Wha' the fuck?" she said, bristling in his grasp. "What the fuck for?"

"For experiments," said Lynne. "They were going to experiment on you, on all of you. They wanted to turn you into something just like that thing."

Completely alert now, the soldier dug in her heels and stopped, snatching her arms away from them. She looked from Lynne to Fredo and then suddenly Fredo found himself trying to breathe with her hand almost crushing his windpipe.

"Not him, not him!" Lynne yelled, pulling at her hands. "Let him go, he's with us!" The last thing Fredo heard as darkness rose up and swallowed him was Lynne begging the soldier not to kill him.

The last person Omar Wing expected to find waiting for him in the cloning lab was Gunnar Gottmund, deep in the throes of what one of the interns referred to as a genuine hissy fit.

"Who the fuck told you that you could take my cells?" Gottmund demanded somewhat shrilly as he stood over the vat, all but stamping his foot. "Who the fuck told you that you could just come into my lab and dismiss my intern from the assignment that I had given her and then just help your fucking-self to something that I was working on? Who the fuck told you that?"

"God told me," Wing said, irritated, as he hit the abort switch. The lid released immediately and slid open. He caught a fleeting whiff of cool, sterile air as he stooped to reach into the vat for the Petri dish.

"Fuck you!" Gottmund shouted and gave him a shove so hard that he fell over backwards.

Wing stared up at him, stunned. He had always own Gottmund was a prick but he had never figured the man for a psycho-prick. The son of a bitch looked like he was having a genuine psychotic break.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Gottmund bellowed at him. "You all think you can just walk all over me, now, is that it? Is that what Bitchenstein said? Did Bitchenstein give you all permission to treat me like shit?"

"Who?" Wing asked, completely mystified.

"You want to take over all my stuff now? Then you go right the fuck ahead!" Gottmund bent over and plucked the Petri disk out of the vat. "But you're not gonna rub my nose in it, you son of a bitch. I'm gonna rub your nose in it!"

Gottmund lunged at him and mashed the Petri dish roughly against his face. Immediately, it cracked into several pieces and all at once Wing found himself with a faceful of blood and glass. He struck out blindly at Gottmund and connected with something rather sensitive.

The other man let out a cry and staggered back, clutching himself. "You bastard. You're all bastards."

Wing mopped the blood and glass from his face with the bottom of his shirt, still unable to get his mind around what was happening. Then he caught sight of Gottmund standing several feet away still holding himself between his legs and panting with rage. But not just plain old garden-variety rage, he realized, this was genuine, old-fashioned *'roid rage*.

In spite of everything, Wing almost laughed out loud. The asshole was taking steroids. Unbelievable. Gottmund was supposed to be an educated man, a scientist distinguished enough to get in on one of Stein's exclusive projects, although there were those rumors his presence here was really courtesy of a high-ranking relative. But even if that was true, he did have three or four doctorates, all of which he had earned honestly, without the need for family connections, and he still didn't know better than to gobble bulk-ups? Over five hundred years of documentation as to the side effects and long-term damage, and Gottmund still thought having the muscles was worth all of that?

Well, sure, why not, Wing thought as he started to push himself slowly up to his feet. The highly intelligent could be as stupid as anyone else when they put their minds to it. Although he would have expected something a bit more inventive from Gottmund.

"Oh, you *still* feel like taking me on?" Gottmund jeered. He began trying to rip his shirt off with one hand; the other one was still cupping his crotch. "Before you do anything you're gonna regret, you better have a good look at what you're up against. See this?" He tried

to point at his chest and pull his arm out of his sleeve all at once. "It'll be like punching a steel vault. You'll break your knuckles."

Wing backed away, knowing that if he actually turned around, he would only provoke Gottmund into attacking him. Gottmund shuffled toward him, still clutching his balls, glaring viciously and muttering threats while he tried to free his hand from his tangled shirtsleeve. To Wing's relief, however, he didn't seem inclined to close the distance between them. Maybe that punch in the balls had hurt Gunnar more than he thought it had.

Nonetheless, he had had more than enough of this shit.' For a place that was supposedly under total and continuous surveillance, it sure could be hard to get any attention around here when you really needed it.

"Security," Wing said, addressing the ceiling for no reason other than it felt right. "Security to the clone lab, Code Zero Zero Zero."

"What did you call me?" Gottmund wanted to know.

"Urgent," Wing replied.

Hyacinth Stein had never been less prepared for anything than she was for the sight that greeted her when, refreshed and renewed by several hours of enhanced therapeutic sleep, she let herself back into the cell where she had left the new specimen with three presumably useless dead bodies.

The rotting cadavers she had expected to find awaiting disposal were gone. No, not just gone, they had vanished, utterly and completely, as if some force had erased every aspect of their existence; not even the smell remained. The thought popped into her mind that Dan Numinen had taken it on himself to clean up for her without being asked. She tried to summon a mental image of him coming in with a cleansing kit full of nanos and then discarded the idea. Even if by some miracle it had occurred to him to do such a thing, that would never have explained what was now lying on the morgue tray.

Exactly what could have explained it, however, was beyond her, at least for the moment. She took a tentative step toward it and then stopped, unconsciously pressing one hand over her heart hammering in her chest. Very uncharacteristic, this kind of physiological reaction. Hyacinth Stein was in charge of herself; it was extremely rare that her body would do anything unless she had specifically told it to. The only other time in recent memory that she had experienced an elevated heart rate was when she had first laid eyes on the beautiful specimen, but that hadn't been half as intense as what was happening to her now.

When the going gets intense, the intense get hypertension, babbled her mind. She let out a single, high-pitched laugh and then covered her mouth with her other hand. Oh God, not hysteria now, too. She tore her hand away from her face and shoved it into the pocket of her lab coat hard enough to make the cloth groan with the strain. The healthy supply of patches she kept there at all times was actually meant to provide an immediate solution for the problem of sudden emotional outbursts from staff members, a precaution she had been extremely glad she had taken after the incident in the cloning lab with Zelda Yamaguchi. Then there were all of Gunnar Gottmund's little "episodes," most of which she could actually head off almost before they ever got started. And all without his even realizing that anything had happened, or not happened.

But there had been very few times when she had felt the need to patch herself. Her primary reason for doing it was simply to familiarize herself with the drug and the effect that various dosages had on her. Just so she would understand what had happened if she ever found herself involuntarily on the receiving end of someone else's good or bad intentions. Although she had to admit, privately, that after an especially annoying day full of encounters with over-sensitive interns, professional staff who actually believed they were good enough to call themselves her colleagues and the occasional clueless grunt, it was a relief to know she could patch away the aggravation in a matter of seconds.

Then equilibrium was simply *there* inside of her; not in a sudden way but as if it had never been gone, and she was gazing at the form

lying on the morgue tray while wondering idly in the back of her mind why she would let herself be so disconcerted by an unexpected development. After all, it wasn't as though this was the first time.

The form lying on the morgue tray looked like someone had tried to produce a creature as similar to her beautiful specimen as possible, but from somewhat different resources. The size and physical proportions were virtually identical to the original, she saw as she moved into the gap between the medical table and the morgue tray. The position of their legs seemed to differ in some slight way, although she was unable to say how. Perhaps there was some minute variation in the width or angle of the hipbones?

The new creature also seemed to comprise of more organic material than the original; either that, or there was more showing on the outside. The morgue tray had no equipment for examination or analysis. Stein looked around for her hand-held scanner, then remembered she had left it in the cell where she had spent the night. Or day. Or whatever those last eight or so hours had been. The realization that she had been so absorbed in her work and that she had actually lost track of the quotidian didn't bother her half as much as forgetting that she had left the hand-held scanner in the other cell. A memory lapse that caused her to be sloppy or careless with equipment just wasn't like her at all.

The mixture of organic and inorganic material on the upper torso of the new creature was completely different from the original specimen, not only in quantity but in substance and even definition. Certain areas of the thing's chest were ambiguous; she could not tell whether the matter was organic or inorganic just by looking at it.

Before she could think better of it, she had placed her ungloved hand in the center of the thing's chest. She snatched her hand back immediately, frowning over her momentary lack of impulse control. At least she hoped it was momentary. The idea that an impulse could have gotten away from her in spite of the fact that she was medicated was somewhat disturbing. Like her memory lapse, she thought unhappily; now she had one more thing to worry about.

She looked at her hand, saw nothing out of the ordinary. Not that she had expected to see any. thing. The nanos in her new specimen

were of the unadorned, stripped-down variety, which she had always preferred to the sort used by everyone else in the universe. There was no real difference between the two kinds in either their basic function or their effectiveness, except for the fact that Stein's nanos of choice lacked the extra sub-quarks that produced pretty silvery lines during periods of nano activity. This special effect had been immediately adopted as an industry standard by nano suppliers everywhere for no other reason, in Hyacinth Stein's view, except that the vast uneducated, inelegant, and despicable multitude known as the general public really liked it when their technology produced pretty silvery lines.

The thought now occurred to her fleetingly that pretty silvery lines might actually be useful. She rubbed her thumb over the skin but the only thing she felt was foolishness.

Think, she ordered herself. Her mindless impulse might have contaminated this thing. It was much more likely, however, that she had contaminated herself if the nanos that had created it were still active. She had no idea whether they were or not and—absent some marked change in its appearance that would clearly indicate an ongoing process—there was no way to find out for certain without a scanner.

There was also the possibility that she had already been contaminated. The idea appeared in her mind unbidden and fully formed, a series of images somehow compressed to a single unit. Nanos had migrated from her specimen to the nearest corpse, and from there to the others, without the need for intervention by any outside agency or force. Which meant that they could have migrated to her at any time without her ever being aware of it.

So go get the frigging scanner. Which is what you should have done as soon as you saw what happened in here. Stein sighed, feeling mildly annoyed with herself. Maybe it was all that sleep she'd had, she thought suddenly. Too many hours of unconsciousness had left her addled instead of rested.

She was turning to leave when a large, hard, and relentlessly strong hand clamped itself onto her right arm. Even as she gave a

startled jump, a second hand took hold of her left arm in an equally fierce and unbreakable grip.

TWENTY

Since Dan Numinen's assignment with Dr Stein was exclusive, he wasn't in the general rotation for security detail or anything else. But Dr Stein had ordered him to monitor all the emergency channels at all times and when he heard Omar Wing yelling for help, he automatically responded.

Technically, he had no obligation to do so but Dr Stein had no immediate need for his services which left him on call but temporarily unoccupied. According to his training, however, all military personnel in the installation were expected to take appropriate action in any emergency unless specifically or forcibly prevented. Even so, had he been somewhere else in the installation, in his quarters or down in the barracks or even on guard outside Dr Stein's old office, he would have stood back and left it to the regular security detail. But it so happened that he was barely thirty feet from the entrance to the cloning lab at the time; security wouldn't make it for another twenty seconds at the very least. It was his duty to render aid immediately.

He slammed the master-key override card that Dr Stein had given him against the door; as soon as he felt the lock disengage, he shoved as hard as he could. The door flew open and hit the wall with a bang that sent a shudder through the floor. Someone let out a startled cry; his sidearm was in his hand before he registered that the two other men in the room were Omar Wing and Gunnar Gottmund.

"Don't shoot!" Gottmund hollered, putting both hands up. Or trying to, his shirt and lab coat were half torn off and one hand was still stuck in the sleeve. Several feet away from him, Wing wasn't wearing his lab coat, something that wouldn't have made Dr Stein any too happy if she had seen him. Lab coats were the law with her.

Jesus, was that blood all over the front of his shirt? Dan Numinen frowned, taking in the smears on the man's face and hands and the drops on the floor that led back to some shards of broken glass.

"Dr Wing, are you injured? Do you need medical assistance?" he asked, watching both men carefully while he tried to figure out who

could have assaulted whom.

"It's nothing," Wing said. "I think the bleeding's already stopped." He touched his face, feeling the area around his nose gingerly, although Numinen couldn't see anything wrong there.

"Dr Gottmund," he said, turning to the other man and unconsciously taking a tighter grip on his weapon. "Are you all right, sir? Do you need medical assistance?"

Gottmund stared back at him with an odd offended look. He lifted his chin belligerently and Numinen saw that his mouth was trembling. The man was still standing in the same position, one raised hand still caught in the end of his sleeve. He sited on Gottmund's right kneecap.

"Dr Wing, you called a Code Zero Zero Zero, is that correct?" he asked, never taking his eyes off Gottmund.

"That's right, corporal," Wing replied, his voice deliberately calm and quiet.

"You are aware that Code Zero Zero Zero indicates a threat to safety created by person or persons under the influence of some substance or contaminant." Numinen barely paused before remembering to add, "Sir."

"Dr Gottmund is unwell," Wing said.

"Fuck you, you fucking asshole!" Gottmund's eyes bulged as they swivelled in Wing's direction but he kept his hands raised.

"Dr Gottmund, I'm warning you to calm down, sir," Numinen told him firmly. "Right now, you need to kneel down on the floor and clasp your hands behind your head."

"Kneel down? On the floor?" Gottmund actually reared back a little, his eyes bulging again. "And do what with my hands?" He made a little motion with his trapped hand. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"Well, just do the best you can, sir," Numinen said, keeping his tone firm. "You can put your hands on your head."

"Put my hands on my head," Gottmund fumed, and did so. "Motherfucker. I look like an idiot. Happy now?"

"No, sir, I want you to kneel down, too," Numinen said.

"I will not," Gottmund informed him loftily. "I'm a scientist, you clueless jerk-off. Not some frigging grunt you found breaking into the fucking liquor supply."

"Sir, unless you have some problem or handicap that prevents you from kneeling down right now, I will be forced to help you."

"It so happens I do!" Gottmund said quickly, his voice rising in pitch again. "It so happens I've got Osgood-Schlatter's Disease. I can't kneel. I can't kneel and you can't make me."

Numinen swivelled his eyes to Wing, who nodded albeit reluctantly.

"It's a real thing," he said, glancing at Gottmund.

"See?" Gottmund's chin went up another inch. "Even he backs me up."

"Most often found in adolescent boys," Wing added, one side of his mouth curling sourly. "So I guess he's telling the truth."

Gottmund turned his upper body toward Wing. "Fuck you, you fucking..."

"Dr Gottmund, if you can't kneel down, then please lie down on your stomach," Numinen said loudly, talking over him.

"What?" Gottmund turned back to him, utterly flabbergasted. "You want me to what?" He went on without waiting for an answer. "Why, you lowlife, inbred, brain damaged, mutant son of a—"

Security chose that moment to arrive and put a tranquilizer dart in the exposed flesh of his rib cage. Gottmund went down immediately, hitting the floor on his left side before he rolled over onto his back.

"Thank God," Wing said, his shoulders slumping as he let his breath out in a rush. "And thank you, too, guys," he added to the security detail, waving one hand weakly.

Holstering his sidearm, Numinen went over to him and steered him gently but firmly to a nearby stool. A chair would have been better but Wing looked ready to keel over and the stool was the closest thing to him. "Are you all right, Dr Wing?" he asked.

"Yeah, thanks, corporal, uh..." the man blinked at his name tag. "You're Linda's brother."

"Yes, sir." The urge to ask Wing if he knew anything about her almost overwhelmed him. "Are you sure you're not seriously injured

in some way, sir?"

Wing made a dismissive gesture with one hand, shaking his head slightly. "When was the last time you saw Linda?"

He felt his mouth drop open. Had Wing really just asked him about Linda? Or was he hearing things now?

"Corporal?" Wing prodded, not unkindly.

"The last time I saw Linda?" Numinen said, still uncertain. "Well, I... actually, I don't remember exactly right this second, sir. But it was at least five days ago. Maybe a week."

"I last saw her a couple of days ago," Wing told him.

"You did, sir? Where was that?" The question was out of his mouth before he could think better of it. But apparently Wing didn't view his question as insubordination.

"She was standing guard outside pre-op," Wing told him. "When all the grunts in the clinic suddenly showed infected, including the six Stein had brought up for neurosurgery."

"Oh. Well, thank you for letting me know, sir," Numinen said.

Wing studied him for a moment. "You don't know where she is now, do you?"

"No, sir." He hesitated. "Uh, do you?"

Wing shook his head. "Did anyone tell you anything about where she was sent?"

"Nothing specific, sir," Numinen replied. "Although I did get the impression from Master-Sergeant Carol that her sudden transfer may have been disciplinary in some way."

Wing raised his eyebrows. "Well, if you should happen to hear from her, or hear anything about her, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know. And I'll do the same for you."

"Thank you, sir. That's very kind of you, sir," Numinen told him.

"But, uh, I would also appreciate it if you didn't mention our little arrangement to Dr Stein," he added. "This is, I'd just like to keep it private. And it really has nothing to do with your duties to Dr Stein."

Numinen blinked at him, surprised. "No, I guess not. All right. I'll keep this just between us. Like you want me to."

"Thanks." Wing eased himself off the stool and looked down at his shirt somewhat ruefully. "Christ, what a mess."

"Are you sure you shouldn't see the doctor, sir?" Numinen asked, concerned.

"Nah, I'm okay. It looks worse than it is. Any time you get a cut on the face, you bleed like a stuck pig because of all the little blood vessels."

"The face, sir?" Numinen peered at the man's face carefully, looking for any breaks in the skin but there weren't any. Guy didn't even have pimples. Was he dizzy or something? Maybe Gottmund had hit him in the head before he'd gotten there.

"Yes," Wing said, frowning at him as if he were dizzy. "Gunnar got me right in the kisser with a Petri dish. My nose didn't break but it sure did..."

Numinen lowered his gaze to the blood on the man's shirt. "Sir, I thought he cut you somewhere around the midsection," he said slowly, "just because that's where all the blood is." He looked up at Wing's face again. "But there's nothing wrong with your face, sir. Nothing at all."

Wing felt the area all around his nose with careful fingers, obviously bewildered. Numinen looked around, spotted a metal tray with a mirror finish lying on a counter and brought it to him.

"See?" he said, holding it up in front of the man's face. "There's nothing there, sir."

Wing took the tray from him without a word, gaping at his reflection like he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Okay," he said finally. "Thanks, corporal. You can go."

"You sure you're all right, sir?" Numinen asked him, concerned. "Because maybe you should—"

"I'm fine, Numinen. You'd better go now."

"Yes, sir." He did a crisp parade-ground about face and headed toward the door still hanging wide open. Nobody had cleaned up the shards of broken glass on the floor, he noted. Security certainly wouldn't have. That wasn't the kind of mess they cleaned up.

What the hell, he'd go ahead and do it himself, Numinen decided. Just as a personal favor to Dr Wing because he was being so nice about Linda. It wouldn't take but two seconds anyway. Provided he could find a dustpan and brush, or a reasonable substitute...

The sight of the girl in the vat hit him with all the force of a physical blow. Like he'd gotten hit in the face and somehow that had knocked the wind out of him, because he couldn't get any air. He couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't yell for help—couldn't do a goddamned thing except stand there and look down at the little girl in the cloning vat and understand exactly what it meant for him to be seeing her lying under the glass cover. He had never been the sharpest knife in the drawer but he didn't have to have a razor edge to understand this.

He became aware then that Omar Wing was speaking, possibly to him, although he didn't have the slightest idea what the man was saying and didn't care.

"Dr Wing," he said, raising his voice to talk over him, "I just found out where Linda is."

He dragged his gaze away from the vat to Wing, who was standing with a tablet in one hand, using the phone function.

"Linda's dead," he went on, as if Wing had responded. "My sister's dead and I'm pretty sure that Dr Stein had something to do with it."

Fredo came back to consciousness to find Lynne waving a stim bottle under his nose. Wow, but did that stim ever do the job, and fast, he thought. The grunt lieutenant who'd been choking him must have been persuaded by Lynne to let go, and was somewhere down at the other end of the lab, trying to speed up the awakening of the rest of the comatose grunts.

"Are you OK? Fredo, tell me you're OK. She didn't mean it, she only just woke up, you know, two weeks drugged comatose, that's going to make anyone a bit paranoid."

His neck and throat were sore, but not so much that he couldn't speak, although he had to swallow a few times first. "I'm fine, I'm fine. But I'll tell you, your friend has one hell of a chokehold."

Sofira came over to them. "Come on, Lynne, stop fanning around with him, he's OK. And you, Freddie or whatever your name is, that

is nothing compared to what you'd have got if I'd really been angry. Now get up and help us get the rest of my guys awake."

Fredo got to his feet and looked around. No permanent damage done, anyway. But he reminded himself to always stay on the right side of Sofira.

For what seemed to Fredo forever, all three of them worked on getting the grunts woken up. In the meantime, Lynne was bringing Sofira up to speed with their situation in the research complex. At least, in so far as Lynne herself was up to speed, which was probably no more than he was.

When all the grunts were finally awake enough to listen, Sofira gave them a rapid-fire summary of just how the sky was falling in and the bottom was falling out, with occasional corrections from Lynne. After a final pep talk, Sofira finally gave her mouth a break, and one of the grunts took the opportunity to ask a question.

"So, who's in charge?"

"Well, it seems they sent Cosgrove elsewhere, so I guess it's down to me."

The grunt shook his head. "Of this place, I mean."

"Now that's a good question." Sofira made a harsh noise that wasn't quite a laugh. "Your guess is as good as mine."

Lynne piped up. "Hyacinth Stein is the nominal head of the project here but it's a military operation. Right now, Stein's holed up somewhere doing God knows what with the monster that attacked the power station." She looked around at the soldiers who obviously didn't like what they had just heard. "But at least we know which side we're on."

"Which would be?" queried the grunt.

"Our side, soldier," barked Sofira. "And this Stein is on the other side. So anyone who's against her is on our side too. Got it?"

A guy Fredo had heard Sofira call Estep spoke next. "We got that, lieutenant, we're all on the same side. But I should just point out that our side is distinctly lacking in anything to defend itself with. Anybody know if there's an armory in this joint? And if there is, who's got the key?"

Sofira looked stumped. But without a moment's hesitation, Fredo said, "Black Carol," and headed for the comm unit.

"Black Carol?" Lynne and Sofira said in perfect unison.

Startled, Lynne turned to ask Sofira if that meant anything to her but the lieutenant was hurrying to catch up with Fredo, saying, "Are you shitting me? Big Bad Blackie's in this house?"

For the first time, Master-Sergeant Black Carol found herself thinking that one monitor really wasn't enough after all. At the same time, she knew she would have been going crazy if she'd actually had more than one. As it was, she was going cross-eyed and wall-eyed by turns trying to see all four of the windows on her screen at the same time. Of course, a good part of that was the shock of finding out Rena the Rocket Sofira was one of the grunts Stein had been keeping under wraps in the clinic for the last two weeks. Which only made it that much harder trying to deal with and calm down Dan Numinen.

Not that she could blame him. All along, she had had a bad feeling about Stein and Linda Numinen and now that she knew she had been right, she had to figure out a course of action and fast. But along with Dan Numinen and Rocket talking a mile a minute, she also had a couple of interns all worked up about something and Ledbetter from security reporting in to tell her that they had just had to take down one of the scientists on a Code Zero Zero Zero, but he couldn't raise anyone from medical to come have a look at him.

Finally she gave up trying to get a word in edgewise and activated the crisis override protocol, which cut the audio on her end but not on theirs, so she could talk without interruption. They all knew they had been muted but it didn't stop most of them from running their mouths, of course—quite the opposite, in fact. She could see that, except for Rocket, they were all yelling, as if they really believed that would do any good.

"Listen up, callers," she said, not so much raising her voice as projecting it in a way meant to cut through all the noise on their respective ends. "I've got four of you on the line at once and it sounds

like we've got a multi-lane, five-star goat-fuck here. But you all gotta shut up and listen up or we're all gonna be where the goat is right now."

Dan Numinen got the message right away, as did Ledbetter. The two interns—Zelda and Roz, according to their name tags—took a little bit longer, so she left them muted.

"Okay, Dan, you first," she said, restoring two-way communication to his line. "Stein's got Linda's cells in a vat, correct?"

"Yes, sarge," he said. "I'm still here in the cloning lab with Dr Wing. You know, Dr Omar Wing? And there's something wrong with him." He looked off to his left briefly.

"Let me talk to him," she said.

"I'm sorry, sarge, I can't get him to come near me. He's down the other end of the lab. Hell, now he won't even turn around and look at me any more. He says there's something wrong with him."

"What is it? Is he sick?"

Numinen shook his head. "I don't know what it is. He said something about something getting into his face and he can feel it. I don't know what he's talking about. See, Dr Gottmund went bughouse. Dr Wing says he's been 'roiding up, and when I came in here, he was threatening Dr Wing, and he'd already hit him, there was blood all over his shirt. Then Ledbetter and the rest of security came and took Dr Gottmund down and got him outta here. So I was gonna clean up the broken glass myself, but when I went looking for something to use, I saw and I recognized her. I knew the girl in the vat couldn't have come from nobody else but Linda and..."

"That's enough, corporal," Carol said, firmly but not unkindly. "You carrying any patches?"

Numinen blinked a couple of times. "Uh..." he patted himself down and came up with something flat and square in a wrapper. "Yeah." His dazed expression morphed into embarrassment.

"Patch yourself up and get a grip, mister," Carol told him. "Hang on, I'll get back to you in a minute." She turned her attention to Rena the Rocket with a broad, grim smile. "What the fuck are you doing in my house, Rocket?"

"That's Lieutenant Rocket to you, sarge. And to answer your question, fuck if I know. I didn't even know this was your house. Near as I can tell, me and my guys were about to get recycled for experiments."

"Aw, fuck me," Carol said, horrified.

"No, fuck me," the other woman replied with a dark laugh. "Although after we were all used up, you were probably gonna be next. You guys got an armory?"

Carol nodded. "It's a good one, too. But if that's not enough for you, there's also a launch-pad."

"You're shitting me," Rocket said, incredulous and paused, obviously waiting for Carol to admit she wasn't serious. "Come on, you are shitting me. Aren't you?"

"Nope. It's pretty much bare-bones. No frills whatsoever, meant for a one-way trip only."

"So what's it for?" asked Rocket, still looking skeptical.

"Hazardous waste disposal. Command put it in just in case somebody came up with something too dangerous even to bury."

Rocket's expression turned serious with a suddenness that Carol found genuinely alarming. "Well, that's pretty goddamned lucky for all of us, she said, "because it just so happens that's exactly what you've got in your house right now, Blackie. Something too dangerous to bury."

"Great. Get somebody to call up a map of this place so you and your guys can see how to get here from the clinic. We'll get you armed." She hung up and went on to Ledbetter. "What's your story? Gunnar Gottmund, right?"

Ledbetter nodded. "He's in the brig right now and we just had to knock him out again. The guy is in seriously bad shape. He needs a doctor. Where the fuck is everybody?"

"Good question," Carol said. "Can you keep him sedated for a while or do you think he might check out if he's down too long?"

"No, he's all right that way, he's not gonna die or anything. But he's so seriously bughouse, he could kill somebody if he gets loose."

"Okay, keep him knocked out till further notice. Leave two guys from your detail to watch him and all the rest of you get back here

five minutes ago. We're in trouble."

Ledbetter hung up by way of saying "Yes, sarge" and she went on to the two interns whom she could see had finally settled down and stopped talking.

"Okay," she said, "what's your story and why aren't you telling it to Supreme Allah?"

"Dr Stein's got a monster stashed away in the isolation area," said the one named Zelda urgently. "We need grunts, lots of grunts, and they should be armed..."

"Somebody's got to hit the panic button so the military can come and evacuate us," put in the other one, Roz. She actually seemed to be the calmer of the two. "I mean, that's what it's for, right?"

Carol hesitated. No doubt it was better that she didn't know; otherwise, neither she nor Zelda would have been calm. But goddamn, sometimes it was hard to know how to talk around it and not sound like you were hiding something. "Relax. I can put a call in to Command right now and tell them to evacuate you people," she said, "which is exactly what I'm going to do right now. So there's nothing to worry about. The best thing for you to do is go back to your quarters, pack your things, and stand by to get the hell outta here. Okay?"

"No, it's more serious than that," Zelda insisted, leaning in toward the monitor. "Dr XX XY found out all this stuff about this creature. It's actually from Earth, the *original* Earth, Earth I. Remember that professor from New Harvard and how he and all his students got killed on a field trip?"

Carol put up a hand. "You guys got patches?"

Both interns looked uneasy. "Not exactly," said Roz. "A doctor has to give them to us, but only if—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Carol said. "Go find some, I don't care where or how, and patch yourselves up. Then do like I told you, pack your things and be ready to move when transport gets here."

The interns opened their mouths to protest, or maybe just to ask questions; Carol didn't know and didn't care.

"Hey, that's all," she told them, muting their sound again. "If we got a problem bad enough that we got to evacuate civilians, then the

installation's under martial law and I'm in charge. You do as I say or my guys'll put you in the brig till it's time to go. And after you're out, you can be charged with obstruction, recklessly endangering the lives of others, mutiny, even murder if somebody dies. So shut up and do what I told you, okay?" She disconnected without waiting for an answer and, just as she did, a new thought suddenly popped into her mind: Where the hell are the rest of the scientists?

Practically on cue, one of the blank windows on her screen lit up again and she found herself looking at Ramirez Gold and XX XY, with Cosi Fan Tutte, Fatima Haddad-O'Reilly, and Supreme Allah crowded around behind them.

"Where the hell are you people?" XX XY demanded. "We need grunts with weapons, there's a..." At that moment, every alarm in the installation went off at once.

TWENTY-ONE

The possibility of some kind of contamination had been a particularly serious matter for the military from the beginning. The very nature of the project meant the potential for disaster was not only greater than usual but multi-faceted as well. And, on top of all of that, there was the worst of the worst-case scenarios: a contamination disaster in the guise of a successful result.

It was entirely possible that the usual precautions, or even the far more painstaking than usual precautions, would fail to prevent a major disaster. This was not, after all, simply research and development; it was military research and development for war. The super-soldier project had not been initiated with the intention of curing the sick, feeding the hungry, or reducing the visible signs of aging. Something bad was *supposed* to happen, although only to an officially designated enemy, and only when Command gave the order.

Such criteria have absolutely nothing to do with the function or effectiveness of either radioactive materials or nano machines.

Or, for that matter, Jason Voorhees. Although, unlike the other two, he had criteria of his own.

He had been surprised when the nanos had first made their way over to the corpse beside him and begun their work. It was because of them that living humans were able to keep him subdued and this enraged him almost as much as human life itself. He knew, in his wordless, unthinking, instinctive way, that the nanos would eventually counteract the force that paralyzed him. More than that, however, he knew they weren't doing it now.

When he felt them shifting within him, it felt as if they were about to drain out of him. But only some of them left, while the ones that stayed manufactured more of themselves to make up the lack, which made him angry at first. Somehow, what little thought he was

capable of had worked out the simple idea that if the nanos left him, it would break the paralysis and he would be free to move and kill again.

He remained unable to move but he could tell that the new nanos were more resistant to the force that kept him motionless. He wouldn't be stuck for much longer.

And meanwhile, the nanos that had left him went to work on the three dead bodies. He knew what they were doing although naturally he didn't wonder why. In a way, he already understood that the mechanisms were simply doing what they had been created to do, which was also what his continuing paralysis had prevented them from doing.

If Jason had been able to do what he had been created to do, that is, move around, kill, sustain a certain amount of damage and then regenerate, the nanos might have confined themselves to his body. But having such a prolonged period of inactivity imposed on them by an outside force, a great deal of pressure had built up from their long-unfulfilled programming. Thus, the proximity of such a severely damaged organism in need of repair induced a condition of relentless purpose. Still unable to move their host, they found a way to move themselves instead and got busy.

The materials available to them were not the same as those they had found to rebuild and improve the host, but making do and adapting were just two of the many rather inventive elements in their programming. Otherwise they adhered as closely as they could to the template of the original host—the facial area was completely identical—but there were certain things that were not merely different but absent altogether.

In the end, the creature built from the three corpses would have been a respectable copy of the original except for the fact that it was not the embodiment of anti-life but simply dead meat. The nanos could make it move, kill, sustain a certain amount of damage and then regenerate. But for all of that, there was no rage, no fury, no hatred, and no merciless drive to wipe out live humans.

It would wipe out live humans, thanks to the nanos; it just wouldn't care.

Hyacinth Stein could probably have got round that particular little drawback with a few key biochemical switches and a little judicious programming, so that the reanimated dead-meat unit behaved as if it cared. Short of a miraculous revelation in the area of metaphysics or mysticism, that was the best she would have been able to do, and it would have been good enough for the military.

Unfortunately, she never had a chance to consider what result she could hope to achieve. She found herself between two extremely strong and dangerous creatures, each of them gripping her arms so tightly that she had no feeling in either of them. Even when the bone above her right elbow finally broke, she didn't really feel anything beyond the suddenness of it snapping and the way the flesh around it vibrated in response.

Or maybe she actually had felt pain, so sharp and intense that she had more or less blacked out on her feet, or whited out, as if she were lost in a blizzard. Because all at once she looked up to see the creatures were no longer lying down but standing on either side of her. Their identical mask faces stared down at her, impassive but horrible, expressionless but hateful, and she knew what was going to happen.

Nonetheless, for one second or maybe even a little longer, she was actually hoping as she gazed up at them. She was hoping even as her right hand found the tablet in her lab coat pocket. Perhaps hoping had made her fingers steady, even nimble; she flipped open the panel on the back of the tablet and found the panic button. Hers was the only tablet so equipped. She had insisted that hers should be the only tablet with an onboard panic button specifically because she had been unable to imagine any situation in which she would actually use it. Another unexpected development. Two in the same day and both of them major events. Life was full of surprises.

The panic button was not the emergency lever meant to call in the rescue teams that the civilian staff (and perhaps even a few of the more naïve and inexperienced grunts) thought it was. It was a true

panic button. Not an SOS but AIL: All Is Lost. As Master-Sergeant Black Carol had carefully avoided telling the two frightened interns, the military's response to a signal from the panic button was not to send out rescue teams and medical aid. However, it was to dispatch a squad of operatives who had been specially trained to secure the site of a catastrophe in such a way that it would be impossible for anything in the affected area to leak out or otherwise escape into the surrounding area, the definition of anything in this case including people. The team also made sure that nothing (and no one) could get in, either.

Ideally, the entire site, whatever it was, would be erased and neutralized, if not actually sterilized in some way. It was the best solution the military could come up with as a way of containing damage to an area as limited as possible. The only thing that would have been better would have been literal excision and expulsion; packing the affected area into a missile and launching it into space. Unfortunately, this was only possible for small-scale problems, like an individual super-soldier prototype. Command had yet to come up with a way to scoop up something as large as a secret installation that extended hundreds of feet underground or several square miles of countryside and shoot that into space. They did, however, have a team of experts working on it.

Hyacinth Stein had never concerned herself with the problem of keeping a disaster contained. People only got what they asked for. They were only too eager to benefit from successful research and development; therefore, they just had to deal with the consequences of failure as well. And if people chose not to think about potential risks, what did that have to do with her? She was a scientist, not a dictator. She wasn't in the business of telling people what to think about.

Her reaching for the panic button now had nothing to do with any desire to protect the outside world from either possible contamination or the monsters who were about to bring her project to an abrupt and premature end. She simply could not bear the idea of leaving behind all of her hard work so that some other far less worthy individual could succeed with it. No fifth-rate mind with a

doctorate from some vocational college in Lower Armpit was going to take the credit for her accomplishments, not if she could help it.

The broken bone in her arm felt as if it were cycling rapidly between white-hot and absolute zero, but she managed to smile up at each of the monsters with satisfaction. The mask-faces stared back at her unchanged and in spite of everything, especially herself, she felt another surge of hope begin in the pit of her stomach.

Perhaps they sensed it too, or perhaps it simply showed in her face. Or perhaps it was nothing except one more moment in time that just happened to be her last. Her finger pressed hard on the panic button even as her arms tore out of their sockets and a screaming firestorm erupted along the length of her body.

Make a wish, she thought in a fleeting moment of utter composure, just before she sank into an agony that was far beyond a pale, tiny word like pain. It seemed like it took centuries before she finally passed all the way through it into the darkness waiting on the other side.

Of course, there had been no wishes made at the critical moment. Even if Hyacinth Stein had actually been able to speak her final words aloud rather than just thinking them, the gallows humor of her parting shot would have gone unappreciated. Had Jason Voorhees understood it, however, it would have enraged him even more, spurring him on to further violence. But since Hyacinth Stein was well beyond a point where such a thing would have made any difference to her, Jason's further violence would also have gone unappreciated.

As the situation stood, it was nothing less than quintessentially existential; the fact that there was no one to appreciate or even to acknowledge its nature also made it perfect. Then Jason Voorhees held up his portion of Hyacinth Stein's horrifically untidy remains and time, which seemed to have stopped somehow, began to move forward again.

Jason took a long look at one side before he switched hands to study what he held from a different angle. What little amount of brain he had in his skull produced a small, dim notion to the effect that there really wasn't much substance to live humans. They ignited such furious hatred in him and yet at the same time, they were ridiculously easy to kill. Even if Jason had had enough brain to wonder why, however, it was unlikely that he would have. Tossing the dead meat aside, he turned toward the door, intending to kick it down, and then stopped.

He had all but forgotten there was another creature in the room, mostly because there was no good reason to remember. He hadn't needed any help to tear that disgusting live thing apart so he had barely noticed that he had actually had some. Now the nanos in his body reminded him how the other creature had come into existence. But that was not what had caused him to come to a complete stop instead of punching his way out of the room. It was what the other creature was doing.

Instead of dropping the wet mess of dead flesh and bone, the creature was pressing it against its own body, mashing and rubbing the ragged, bloody pieces on itself as if it thought the material could be absorbed.

Jason went on watching while the nanos informed him wordlessly that the creature was right; what was left of the woman could be absorbed into its own body and used. In fact, the creature had to do this. It was composed of plain dead tissue that was not imbued with anti-life, and dead tissue did not last very long; it had to be replaced.

When the last of the bloody fragments had disappeared into the creature's body, it raised its head alertly and then immediately went for the portion that Jason had discarded. Jason followed with his eyes, watching as nanos made the areas of its body seem to ripple and heave and erupt suddenly here and there with a cluster of worm-shaped things that grabbed and flowed into each other again as the new material was taken in.

Then he looked down at himself. The nanos inside him had done the same thing for him with the ammunition the humans had fired at him before he had been captured, immobilized, and given over to that woman, so she could torture him for her own amusement. The extra material had made him stronger, yes—but in the end, his being stronger could not overcome the nanos' inherent weakness. In the long run, he would have been better off without them. He had never even needed them before.

The concept of trying to get rid of them, however, was beyond him. They were inside him; he would go on with them inside him. They would help fix and improve him as necessary.

But he would not submit to their weaknesses any more. Allowing nanos to incorporate dead human meat into his body would not do him any good at all.

He turned away from the dead thing, still scrubbing scraps of flesh against itself, and kicked the door out of the frame and into the hallway.

Stepping out, he looked one way and then the other, mildly surprised to find no humans coming at him with weapons, the way they usually did in hallways. Not that it mattered, although he was actually tired of always finding himself in one of these stupid hallways. Didn't any of them go outside any more?

He turned left, obeying a vague sense that said he would come to elevators or stairs, which would allow him to get around this place and find some live humans to kill. After which he could find his way out and find some more live humans to kill.

It was an especially long hallway, and there was another door to kick down before the end of it. Only after he got through the second door did he finally notice the continuous screaming and ringing and buzzing of alarms.

He reached a bank of elevators to find one of them already waiting for him with its doors open. Almost as if it really was there for him... or for those things inside of him. Something in his awareness told him that this was, in fact, exactly right. That was also those things inside of him, telling him things that he had never had to care about before.

Jason stepped into the elevator and waited as it performed its functions. Just as it started to ascend, however, he felt a sudden and extremely powerful shock, both physical and yet at the same time completely intangible.

It made him lift his hand and reach out to press one of the buttons on the elevator, and then told him where to go when the elevator stopped.

It was the first time since he had joined the military that Dan Numinen actually felt stupid. He couldn't really remember the last time he had felt that way, but it had probably been back in high school and that didn't count. For the most part, he had never suffered from low self-esteem. Not being the sharpest knife in the drawer wasn't the worst thing to be (or not to be). He had found the ways in which he was capable and competent, so he didn't have to feel bad about what he wasn't.

The sarge having to tell him to patch himself up, though, that hadn't made him feel too capable or competent at all. Who the hell had to be told to do that? And it was a goddamned good thing the patch had kicked in before all bughouse hell had broken loose the way it did with the sirens and all that shit. God only knew what that would have done to him while he was too stupid to even think of how to take care of himself.

He looked down at the clone of his sister in the vat and then at Omar Wing, who was hunched over on a stool at the far end of the lab with his back to him. Looked like the guy hadn't moved a muscle since planting himself there. Wouldn't turn around, wouldn't talk, or at least he hadn't said anything loud enough to be heard over the alarms.

Maybe he should just go on over to the man, patch him up and get his ass out of here so he could meet up with the rest of the scientists, wherever they were. Probably all heading for the nearest escape hatch. That was what he'd have done if he'd been one of them and he'd just found out somebody had pressed the panic button.

It occurred to him suddenly that the scientists might not know exactly what was supposed to happen if somebody hit the panic button. None of them were military, after all, and if no one had thought to tell them about the panic button protocol, then there was no way they could know. Could they?

Nah, he probably had it all wrong. They weren't just a bunch of average civilians, they were scientists and they knew this was a military project. So they had to know how everything worked. Didn't they?

Not necessarily, he thought, gazing at Omar Wing's hunched over form. It was a sure bet that Dr Stein knew just because she was the head of the project. But she'd have kept it all need-to-know for the rest of them, interns and scientists alike, and this was something she'd have figured none of them needed to know. Because she wasn't very nice.

"Dr Wing?" he called, but he was barely able to hear his own voice over the din.

As if on cue, most of the alarms cut off then and the sudden quiet was startling enough to make him jump. But Wing never moved a muscle.

"Dr Wing?" Numinen said again, taking a few steps toward him. "I have to get you out of here right now. All those alarms and shit, that means somebody somewhere hit the panic button, and that means this project here is officially over. Command'll already have a team on the way to close the place down and all civilian personnel are supposed to be gone by the time they get here. Even you, sir."

He saw the man stiffen slightly. "Get away from me," he growled in an odd, ragged voice, like something was twisting his throat, strangling him while he was talking.

"I'm sorry, Dr Wing. I've got to get you outta here, it's not safe to stay here any more. That team that's coming out, they've got orders to seal this place up no matter what, and if you're still in here, they won't wait for you to get out. In fact, when they get here, they won't bother asking if there's anyone still inside, they'll just carry out their orders. They don't fool around when it's a panic button. Now, you can file a complaint and if you want to, you can even blame me for

whatever you don't like. But you can't do that if they seal you up in here."

Wing bent lower, pulling one shoulder forward and then the other, as if he were trying to drag himself free of something without having to move.

"Dr Wing, I'm not fooling around, neither. I been patient with you because I know you're all upset. I'm real upset about Linda mys—"

"Get away from me."

Numinen inadvertently took a step back in surprise. The man barely had a human voice at all now... What the fuck?

What Wing had told him came flooding back then—Gottmund shoving something in his face, broken glass, the blood but no cuts in his skin.

"Aw, shit," Numinen said, feelingly. "Okay, I get it now, Dr Gottmund contaminated you. I'm sorry, Dr Wing, I didn't understand. But that's okay, this lab's got quarantine suits in the emergency locker. You just put one of those on and then you can get outta here—"

He cut off as Wing straightened up and got off the stool. Somehow, the man had actually grown bigger while he'd been sitting there, and Numinen just hadn't been able to see it because of the way he was hunched over. But he could sure see it now. The scientist was bigger and wider and he was still getting bigger and wider.

Numinen took another couple of steps back, thinking that he really ought to call for back-up, back-up and two or three doctors and all the nurses from the clinic. Wing turned around to face him and he heard himself yell something like "Jesus Christ in orbit!" It was an expression that used to drive Linda crazy when they were kids.

There was some kind of metallic shell forming on Wing's face, or possibly in it. Numinen couldn't actually tell whether it was covering the skin or whether nanos were transforming the skin into a different substance altogether. His body was definitely morphing, clothes and all, and it looked to Numinen like everything was getting mixed together somehow: flesh and cloth and other stuff as well.

"Aw, jeez, Dr Wing, you shoulda said..." Numinen hesitated, wincing. "Well, you shoulda said you felt, uh..." he gestured at the

man's body. "You know, not too good." He backed off another few steps. There might have been a couple of quarantine suits in the barracks that would have fit him, Numinen thought, but probably not for long. Wing was actually swelling up bigger right in front of his eyes.

"I gotta ask the sarge what to do about this," he said uneasily as Wing took a step toward him. "There's special equipment and stuff..."

Wing took another step toward him and then another, his big hands flexing, opening and closing. Numinen tried to think of something to say and then just hit the emergency call button on his belt. The call was silent; it would just go straight through to the sarge and security and let them know where he was and that he needed help. No noise, so it shouldn't have provoked Dr Wing or stampeded him in any way.

But either Wing had some idea of what he had just done, or it all just became too much for him right at the same moment, because suddenly he lunged forward and then Numinen found himself looking down from the discomfort of the man's two-handed grip around his neck, his feet dangling several feet above the floor.

He looks like that creature, Numinen thought in amazement, pulling futilely at Wing's hands and trying not to black out. He looks like that creature because he's turning into that creature.

"Dr Wing!" he rasped, kicking his legs now. "Please... you don't have to..."

But Wing's face was completely gone now, covered up or changed or maybe a little of both. It didn't matter. With his face gone, there was no way to tell if Wing understood anything he was saying or was too bughouse to even know who he was any more.

"Please," he begged faintly. "Please... sir..."

Not until he had looked at his reflection in the tray Numinen had brought him had he realized he was in trouble. Then he had felt a tingling where the cuts in his face should have been—just a

psychosomatic reaction no doubt but goddamn was that ever moot right now. The same as how he had stood there feeling his face like some idiot who thought it was possible to *feel* where nanos were.

Fucking nanos.

Fucking nanos in those fucking cells.

It had never occurred to him that those fucking cells had been full of fucking nanos. Those fucking impossible cells had been loaded with fucking nanos and never once had it ever crossed his mind. That was moot now, too.

Even though he could have found out in only a couple of seconds what the goddamned cells were carrying. Even first-year undergrads knew that unless there was perceptible activity, you had to test for the presence of nanos in a specific way because they just didn't show up otherwise. If they were inactive, they were inert. Except in live vertebrates; organic life couldn't tolerate a large concentration of nanos over an extended period of time. Humans especially had a low threshold for internal nanos. As if organic life and nanos were the antithesis of each other in some way.

Only here he was, full of them. Full of those cells and full of nanos and no, it wasn't possible to feel nanos just by touching them but you could feel the process if it was extensive enough and this sure was. He was full of cells and full of nanos. Could he feel the process? Oh, could he feel the process. Processes, plural. All at once, they were in every part of his body, the cells, the nanos, blooming everywhere inside him, taking over. They were consuming his body while his body consumed them. And it was almost finished, so all that was moot now, too.

Everything was moot now. Now was moot now because even time itself had changed.

Disorientation took him like a tidal wave and he thought he was losing consciousness, falling into some kind of turbulent darkness. And then suddenly he had opened his eyes to see himself holding Dan Numinen high in the air by his neck. As if he had intended to watch the soldier slowly strangle to death.

His mind started to sink into darkness again and as it did, he could feel something else moving in to take its place. It didn't make any

sense but there wasn't any other way he could articulate it to himself. He had no idea what it was, but he hated it instantly, hated it and feared it, and wanted to wipe it out.

He fought to stay conscious, to stay awake and aware, refusing to give way to the other thing, whatever it was. If he let it supplant him, he knew that he would never come out of the darkness again.

"Dr. Wing..." the soldier strained. His face was horribly red and his legs were kicking more frantically.

There was something he should do, he thought, keeping his gaze fixed on the man he was strangling. Something he really had to do. But as soon as he tried to think of what it was, he could feel his mind begin to fade and his dominance weaken. He couldn't let that happen. He couldn't lose his hold to that other thing.

And then all at once, that other thing was not only inside of him fighting for control but also standing in the open doorway of the cloning lab.

The enemy inside him surged.

TWENTY-TWO

There was no question in Sofira's mind that Black Carol was in command. As far as she was concerned, this was one of those situations where rank had to take a back seat to the prevailing conditions. She'd been unconscious for two weeks and although she was awake again and fit for action, she didn't even know where the hell she was. And even after Black Carol told her, she was having a hard time believing it.

That was a waste of time, under the circumstances. Instead, she gave herself over to her training: act now, believe later. She had gotten her people to the barracks, arriving just before every alarm on the planet went off. Boy, had that been a bitch; if Blackie hadn't cut them off, she was sure her ears would have started bleeding.

Blackie had already sent a detail to escort the scientists out of the installation, making sure that only the scientists left and then dispatched a second group to isolation to seal it off manually.

"Just to try and make sure that whatever kind of trouble started there stays there instead of hitching a ride out of town with us," she had told Sofira while they broke out the extra weapons. There had been no shortage of weapons, even for an unexpected couple of dozen extra grunts; clothing, however, had been a different matter altogether. "You'll have to serve in clinic pyjamas," Blackie had informed them. "But it could be worse. You could have woken up to find yourselves in full-body condoms, or nothing." Then she had turned to Sofira and started to say something about strategy when the emergency call had come in from the grunt in the cloning lab.

Sofira's first thought on seeing the creature on the monitor in the surveillance area was to wonder what the hell had happened to it. It looked like a genuine old-school homunculus that Victor Frankenstein himself had glued together with his own two hands, using whatever he had found within reach. After which, he'd painted the whole thing with varnish. Or glaze, maybe, thinking he was going to fire it in a kiln. Irregular smeary patches of what looked like clothing and flesh ran up and down the thing's legs; the torso was

partially covered with some kind of hard, rubbery stuff. If she hadn't recognized the mask, Sofira thought, she'd have sworn that someone had actually made a second monster.

Then Blackie had pointed to a separate monitor getting a feed from a different part of the same lab and she had just about jumped out of her skin.

"Goddamn, Blackie," she said, turning to the other woman. "You got scientists *making* these fuckers?"

"Those aren't fuckers," Black Carol said grimly. "They're super-grunts."

Sofira hit her own forehead with the heel of her hand. "Right. Jesus, I must have lost half my brain somewhere. Otherwise, I would have realized as soon as I laid eyes on that big bastard. The legendary super-soldier project."

Black Carol laughed with no humor. "You thought it was just a rumor, too?"

"Half the shit they tell us is a rumor. Nobody's ever sure which half, though. Not even Command." Sofira shrugged. "But I should have known. We all should have realized as soon as we saw it. Who the fuck let that thing get loose?"

"That thing isn't from here," Carol said, pointing at the creature now entering the cloning lab. "That one came from you guys at the power station."

"And here I thought he was with you." Sofira looked down at the weapon she was holding. "Bad news, Blackie, these don't work so well. You got any zap guns? How about thunderbolt rifles?"

"Some, but not a whole lot. Stein didn't want us using them. Claimed they generate random interference and screw up her precious nanos."

"They do, which is why we need them. That's how we brought him down the first time."

Carol looked at the monitors doubtfully. "Sure hope it works again."

Me, too, Sofira thought as they went back to the armory.

There were nowhere near as many stun weapons as Sofira had hoped, and certainly not as many as there should have been. Carol

decided Sofira's grunts should have them by virtue of previous experience, such as it was.

But at least they were well-kept and fully-charged, Sofira thought as they ran through a group weapons-check. Then, as an afterthought, she grabbed several flame-units. Chances were slim to none that any of those creatures would burn but a faceful of fire might slow them down a second or two.

She started to ask Blackie if there were any more of those lying around but the other woman waved her off and pointed at the comm link in her left ear, mouthing, "Command."

"Hope they're telling you something good, Sofira muttered. Judging from the look on the sergeant's face, however, it was anything but.

My mind is drowning in my head, Wing thought. It was a struggle just to look at the thing slowly making its way through the vat area of the cloning lab. His eyes felt strangely heavy, as if the act of seeing was almost too much of an extra burden. Nothing else seemed to be working right, either; his body had become an oversized shell that didn't really belong to him any more, and vice versa. He felt as if something, some force, almost like a strong electro-magnetic field, was in the process of pushing him out or extinguishing him.

It should have been a ridiculous delusional kind of notion but he sensed the presence of the interloper as solidly as if it were something outside of his body that he could touch to prove its existence to himself.

Which it was.

He had to fight to use his own eyes to see it standing there in front of him, but it was there. Its proximity stimulated and agitated the force that was battling to supplant him in a way that felt like a primitive, even animal familiarity or recognition.

Understanding flared in him then, but it didn't make it any easier to hold his own against the power that was trying to eradicate him.

Those cells were from this thing. The cells that I put in the vat, that Gunnar infected me with. I am like this thing. I am of this thing. I will be this thing.

He made his hands open; he was vaguely aware that whatever he had been holding had dropped to the floor but he didn't try to look at it, although he had a dim idea that he should have. If he had been in control, he would have done, but there was no way to be sure that the force inside him would not overwhelm him.

The creature standing in front of him turned its impassive, merciless steel face toward the motionless human lying in a heap nearby. It stared for a long moment, then lifted its inhuman head and looked directly into his eyes.

Shock was a pale word for the sensation that Wing felt not only in the traitor body but in everything he was: thoughts, memories, perceptions, what he knew, what he believed he knew, even what he didn't know. He felt as if he had been struck but not touched, shattered without being fragmented.

This must be what a tuning fork feels when it resonates with something, he thought in some faraway, almost detached area of his compressed self. Or what happens to a compass needle when it finds true north.

All at once, everything there was to know about Jason Voorhees, now resident in his own body, became perceptible to him in a single, revelatory burst.

Then the moment passed and he was surprised to find that he, Omar Wing, was still in existence. He shouldn't have been, he thought. That moment had been a Big Bang; it should have snuffed out the last remaining spark of humanity and replaced it with anti-life. And yet here he was, still holding on, an infection that refused to go away.

But how? The force that had taken over and changed the body was obviously many times stronger than he was. And this. creature, this Jason Voorhees somehow reinforced it so that it should have become

that much stronger. Omar Wing should have gone out like a guttering candle, he should have evaporated, dissipated, ceased to be not only in body but also in soul. Why hadn't he?

The answer came to him wordlessly, in a series of sensations he vaguely associated with rapidly-changing chemical states or energy levels, which was perhaps the closest thing he had to a vocabulary that could express the nature of being alive. He didn't understand it but at the same time he didn't have to. He was still in existence because he refused to be erased, and he would remain in existence for as long as he continued to refuse.

That wouldn't be for much longer, though, Wing thought; he was weakening steadily, while the force inside of the body showed no sign of fading in the slightest. All it had to do was wait for him to wear out.

He actually felt Jason Voorhees' rage increase and he tried to brace himself, thinking the creature was going to physically attack him and wear him out that way. But Jason was turning toward the doorway and Wing felt his body turning with him. Standing side by side, they watched the soldiers pouring into the lab through the open door.

Lynne had been briefly flattered when Sofira had tossed her and Fredo full-sized weapons rather than sidearms and ordered them to evacuate the civilians, but she knew better than to let it go to her head. She had tried to tell both Sofira and the sergeant that at least one grunt should go with them, just to verify this was an official order. But neither woman was having any and when she saw the barrel of Sofira's weapon moving in her general direction, she shut up and left in a hurry.

Her apprehension would not lessen, though, especially when Fredo insisted on using the elevators instead of the stairs. It was perfectly safe, he told her; the installation wasn't burning down, the power wasn't going to fail (how the hell did he know, she wondered), and stairs wasted time and energy. Reluctantly, she let him herd her into a lift but when the doors closed and it began to ascend, she

suddenly found herself in the grip of a genuine, full-blown panic attack.

Five seconds later, she found herself calmly wiping the tears away with the back of her hand while her breathing returned to normal. "I know I'm supposed to thank you," she said to Fredo, looking down at the patch he had slapped on her forearm. "But this kind of thing can't really be good for people. I mean, every time you feel something unpleasant, you just—I don't know, take an antidote?"

"Argue with me after we get out of here," Fredo said irritably. "But between now and then, try not to go bughouse again. If things get really bad, there might not be enough for everybody."

"You think we're going to have to use those?" she asked.

He shrugged.

She was relieved to find all the interns with the scientists and the clinic nurses in Cosi Fan Tutte's office. The only one missing was Gunnar Gottmund; it was Fredo's opinion that he had already been evacuated by the soldiers guarding the brig and was, at this very moment, sprawled on his back somewhere on the well-kept grass outside the installation in blissful, sedated stupor. In any case, he certainly wasn't going to go looking for him.

Lynne made a note to call Black Carol and ask her about Gottmund; in the meantime, everyone was in favor of evacuating the installation as soon as possible, even those who hadn't had an opportunity to return to their quarters and grab a few personal things. Perhaps they'd already had a healthy supply of patches lying around in the office, Lynne thought, waiting at the door as Fredo led them all out. He had wanted her to go first but she had to remind him that she didn't know her way around as well as he did, so it made more sense for her to cover them from the rear.

For a moment, he seemed inclined to argue with her and then, much to her relief, changed his mind. Lynne knew that he probably thought her notion of covering the group from the rear was overdramatic, even silly, considering the grunts had both hostile

creatures cornered in the cloning lab. But that was only because he hadn't seen what she had seen at the power station.

Her heart gave a small, frightened leap at the memory; barely a second later, she felt the patch on her arm release a little more chemical calm into her system. The stuff didn't let up for a second, she marvelled; the military must have used industrial-strength dosages. Either that, or having it on her left arm made that much difference in how quickly it worked.

The hell with it, she told herself suddenly, marching along behind Roz and Devon O. Getting out of yet another disaster alive was nothing to complain about. And the power station had been a rougher ride, a whole lot rougher. All things considered, she probably owed fate a thank you note. Then somebody up near the front of the group screamed and Fredo was hollering for her in absolute terror.

"It's almost *deja vu*," Lynne said, unaware that she had spoken aloud.

"Shut up and help me kill the thing," Fredo said, hefting his weapon.

The thing in question was standing between them and an elevator waiting with the doors open, the way the original creature had confronted the group she had been with in the power station. But it hadn't waited very long before it had attacked. It had killed everyone except her, and it would have killed her, too, if Sofira hadn't been there to...

Oh, God, she thought. Don't tell me I've got to take off my shirt this time.

But the thing standing in front of them didn't move: it didn't lunge forward, didn't back away, didn't do anything at all, for which Lynne was hugely grateful. She didn't really want to see it, period, but she especially did not want to see it moving around. This wasn't the creature she had first seen at the power station. This was something

else, something that she thought might be, in its own way, a whole lot worse.

There was one similarity: the metallic covering that served as its face seemed to be virtually identical to the original creature's. But the rest of it...

The rest of it was moving, she realized suddenly, feeling her gorge rise. Not all at once, she saw after a moment, but in parts, which was what the creature seemed to be made out of spare parts, odds and ends, only they seemed to have grown onto, or into, or out of the thing, like tumors. Except some of the tumors seemed to be made out of standard military issue uniforms.

That would have been bad enough but then suddenly, a mouth formed on the impassive metal face. "Well, this is an unexpected development," it said in Dr Hyacinth Stein's voice. "I was starting to think there was nothing else to eat around here but grunt."

Lynne was completely unaware that both she and Fredo were screaming at the top of their lungs as they opened fire on the thing. This one was nowhere near as strong or as indestructible, she saw. It staggered back under the force of the impact from their weapons and whole chunks of flesh, or something, blew off splattering the walls and the floor.

Even so, it still wouldn't just fall down and die. Of course, Lynne thought as she and Fredo drove it backward toward the elevator. It was nothing but a cheap copy of a real monster, an inferior knock-off that leaked blood and rotting tissue, but they still couldn't kill it.

What kind of a fucking universe is this? Lynne thought furiously, trying to will the thing to fall apart at least.

Finally, she and Fredo managed to force it all the way into the elevator, where it fetched up against the back wall.

"The neck! Aim for the neck!" Fredo yelled, firing madly.

"Brilliant!" she screamed back at him, doing as she was told. A few seconds later, the creature's head toppled forward and landed on the floor with a sickening wet thud. Lynne and Fredo jumped back as the body crumpled in a heap on top of it, just managing to avoid some splatter.

AH at once the silence seemed to roar in Lynne's ears. She turned around to see the scientists and interns still frozen in horrified disbelief, staring at the mess in the elevator. Yeah, me too, she said silently.

There was another very brief burst of weapons fire behind her and she whirled, raising her own weapon, and saw Fredo getting out of the elevator, careful to avoid stepping on any bad monster remnants. He had shot out the control panel.

"Well, all right," she heard herself say in a slightly shaky little voice. "I guess we'll have to wait for another one."

Fredo frowned at her and shook his head. "Nah, you were right. We ought to take the stairs."

"And we better take them at a run," said Ramirez Gold suddenly, pointing at something on the floor to her left. "Look."

Lynne was horrified to see that a chunk of unidentifiable tissue had actually begun to writhe, its movements weak at first but obviously gaining strength.

"This way! Really, really fast!" Fredo hollered, albeit somewhat needlessly. Over half the group was ahead of him before he finished getting the words out.

TWENTY-THREE

Kinship was something that living humans felt for other living humans. Jason Voorhees wouldn't have felt anything like that if he had been human and the concept did not exist in the realm of anti-life. Besides, this copy of himself, this caricature was fatally flawed—there was a spark of life in it that would not go out.

The thing to do was reach over, grab the copy, and rip and tear until the spark went out. He started to do just that, but the nanos stopped him. They wanted him to let the spark just go out by itself, without damaging the other one.

He tried moving toward the humans instead and found his movement in that direction completely unhindered.

They surprised him by trying to shoot him with power again instead of the usual ammunition. Not that it mattered. The crackling force that had scrambled the little machines inside of him and rendered him immobile no longer had any effect on him. The little machines had realigned themselves and the forces that made them go; they existed at a different frequency, a different resonance, and it was not one that humans could have tuned into very easily.

He waded into the soldiers firing their useless weapons, reached out and helped himself to their very breakable bodies, crushed the meat, twisted the bones, pulled pieces off some and used them to beat down others. If he had been even remotely like a human, he might have wondered at how easy it was to kill them all. But he wasn't. Between the surging fury of anti-life and the little machines working away inside of him, he barely noticed when one of the humans sprayed him with fire.

Omar Wing found the urge to join Jason Voorhees in the carnage almost irresistible. His insides seemed to be boiling with it. Once or

twice, he started to move forward and barely managed to stop himself.

What he had to do was stop Jason Voorhees; he had to stop the killing. Except he knew that if he let himself move, it wouldn't be to stop him but to join in.

He was weakening even more. The sight of all that death, the blood, the pain, the screams was crushing the last bit of life out of him, and yet he couldn't look away. If he turned from the sight, he would lose his hold and then he would be gone.

Something touched his leg. He turned sharply and saw the human he had been holding high in the air by his neck.

"Dr Wing," the soldier said in a barely audible rasp. "Can't you help?"

He had a fleeting sensation of weightlessness. Then he woke up.

There was no reason for it. Like everything else that had happened, it didn't make any sense, but he wasn't going to waste any time thinking about sense. Somehow, things had flipped and he was suddenly the dominant force in this mutant, traitor body. That was all he had to think about, and he didn't think about it for long.

He strode across the room, refusing to look down at what was under his feet, found his way through the weapons and the wounded and the dead, batted away the few humans, and finally took hold of the one he resonated with and who resonated with him. Then, without really knowing how he was doing it, he told the nanos inside both of them what he wanted.

There was a flash that Wing felt rather than saw, and Jason Voorhees suddenly crashed to the floor, paralyzed.

Wing rolled him over onto his back, intending to pick him up and then paused; the monster's eyes seemed to burn as they looked directly into his. The paralysis wouldn't last indefinitely; he could tell that Jason knew it as well as he did.

Just last long enough, he begged silently. Long enough for me to get to where I need to go.

Dan Numinen wasn't sure if he would ever be able to talk normally again. His windpipe felt as if it had been bent in half and he didn't have to look in the bottom of a metal tray to know his neck was black and blue. And he had no idea why Omar Wing had been ready to kill him one minute and suddenly turned rescuer the next. For that matter, he couldn't have said what had made him think the man would turn rescuer after nearly choking him to death.

Maybe it's just that I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer, he thought as he hurried after Omar Wing. I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer and I'm all patched up, so I'd probably do just about anything. Like chase after a couple of monsters.

He hadn't understood right away where Wing was going with Hyacinth Stein's erstwhile favorite thrown over one big shoulder, and apparently Wing was even less able to talk than he was, so it was no use asking him. But Black Carol and the other grunts from the clinic—the few who hadn't been literally torn apart—had known that Wing was heading for the launch pad.

Up until then, he hadn't realized that the scientists all knew about the launch pad, too. But he supposed that only made sense. After all, if anyone at the installation produced something they had to get rid of as completely and quickly as possible, it would be the scientists. So they'd have had to know what to do, and fast.

It wasn't far from the cloning lab to the launch pad, and the launch pad itself was pretty compact. You didn't really need a whole lot of room to basically fire a missile you didn't plan ever on recovering. The silo was built into a corner of the installation and that was pretty much all there was to it: a silo and a control room, and the blast area lower down you had to stay away from.

They had just reached the entrance to the control room when every alarm in the place went off again. The creature still draped over his shoulder, Omar Wing stopped and turned to him and then to Black Carol and her friend, the one from the clinic that she called Rocket.

"The crew from Command is here," Black Carol told them. "Let's get this done as quickly as possible."

She was definitely going to get court-martialed for this, Carol thought as she ran through the prelaunch routine in the control room with Sofira. So much for her future as an assassin. When the military got through with her, she'd be lucky to land a job as an exterminator.

Beside her, Sofira leaned over and gave her a nudge. "What is it? You look like somebody shot your dog. Or did your dog shoot you?"

"The bitch." Carol gave her a sidelong glance. "I'm fucked, is what it is. When Command finds out I shot that thing into space, they're gonna draw and quarter my ass and feed it to the pigs for breakfast."

"What are you talking about?" Sofira asked. "They're gonna seal this place up..."

Carol shook her head. "No. They're not. I got a message from them earlier. They had a tap on our surveillance system, plus a few extras of their own. They know everything that happened, everything Stein did." She paused to turn on the half-dozen monitors on the wall facing her but for some reason, they were slow to light up. "They even had a few eyes we didn't know about in the isolation area."

"Yeah?" Sofira leaned over and tried to help her with the monitor controls. "So?"

"Well, they're not coming to seal up the place. They're bringing in replacement staff." She met Sofira's incredulous gaze with an unemotional stare. "Rocket, this project was meant to produce super soldiers. Command is not gonna stop until they get them." The central monitor in the top row lit up to show them the payload. The hatch was still shut.

"Can we open that from here?" Sofira asked.

Carol nodded and touched a lighted panel on the console. For a couple of very long seconds, nothing happened and she was afraid that Command's team had already managed to put in some kind of lock-down. But then the hatch shifted bit as the seal released and

began to open slowly inward. Carol winced; damn, just their luck that the payload opened inward. It might give Wing some trouble shutting it again.

Fuck it. She would launch it with the hatch open if she had to. It would close automatically as soon as it hit the air anyway; she would just have to hope once Wing got the son of a bitch inside, he wouldn't get a chance to jump out.

Sofira nudged her again and pointed at the last monitor on the right, which displayed a wide-angle view of the helipad one hundred feet straight up from the highest level of the installation. Three choppers had touched down, the third one only moments ago; a full load of passengers was disembarking from a side door under the brisk supervision of several armed guards. None of the new arrivals were in uniform, although Carol could tell just by the way they moved that they weren't military. She could also tell that they were all about as thrilled to be here as the original group had been when armed guards had herded them into the installation.

The original group? Carol frowned. Hyacinth Stein and everyone else—Wing, Gold, Tutte, and the others, Supreme Allah and the interns, hell, even herself and the grunts—were they really the original group on this project, in this installation? Or had she just assumed that this place hadn't been sterilized and re-staffed once before simply because Command had chosen not to say otherwise?

Dan Numinen moved into view on the center monitor, beckoning to someone and then pushing the payload hatch farther inward. Wing appeared, still carrying the creature over one shoulder. Carol hit the comm button.

"Hurry up, Dan," she said urgently. "We've got company."

"I know, sarge," Numinen replied, his voice filtered and woolly in the console speaker. He stopped to look around, as if he really thought he could see exactly where her voice was coming from. Wing pushed past him and bent over, dumping his burden on the floor of the walkway just outside the open hatch.

"He's staggering," Sofira pointed out tensely.

Wing was more than staggering; Carol saw him go down on one knee. Dan Numinen went to him, put his hands on the big, thick

shoulders briefly. Wing shook him off, seemed to hesitate, and then reached for the creature's feet. With an enormous effort, he heaved himself to a standing position and started to roll the monster over backwards into the payload.

Abruptly, Jason Voorhees' hands shot out and grabbed hold of either side of the open hatch. Wing froze in obvious surprise. Jason kicked out with both legs and Wing let go, staggering backwards several feet into Numinen and knocking him down. He strained to regain his balance with an effort, seemed to be on the verge of righting himself, and then fell squarely on top of Numinen. Before Carol could even react, the speakers in the console gave a loud crackle.

"Attention all personnel," said a male voice she didn't recognize. "Stand down immediately. Repeat: stand down immediately, you are relieved of duty. Take no further action regardless of what you are doing and hold your positions until further orders." Carol gave the ceiling a murderous glance, then leaned forward and hit the comm button for the launch pad again.

"Wing, Numinen, I don't know if you can hear me or understand me but get that fucking thing off my planet right now."

The ceiling speakers crackled again. "Belay that order!" snapped the new voice. "Who is speaking? Identify yourself. All personnel are to stand down now. Freeze, because we will shoot you."

"You heard the man!" Carol said, keeping the comm open. "We're out of time. Get that fucker outta here!"

"Sergeant Carol, you are hereby relieved of duty and are under arrest. Hold your position and do not attempt to give any more orders or to escape, we will shoot you and anyone with you on sight."

Sofira gave a grim laugh. "Motherfuckers gotta see us first and that might be kinda hard." She got up and headed for the door, her sidearm already in her hand. "You do what you can with them and I'll see how long I can hold off the friendly fire."

Carol didn't try to argue. Countdown had to start now, she realized, or the crew from Command would have time to abort the launch. She hit a switch and a panel directly in front of her slid back to reveal the keypad that would unlock the final launch controls.

Quickly, she entered a string of numbers from memory and prayed that her training in full recall was still fresh enough.

A small, square screen to the left of the keypad lit up with a message: Override protocol active. Prelaunch sequence terminated. Ten seconds to countdown, as of... NOW. Only the military would have a countdown to a countdown, Carol thought. Thirty Seconds to launch. On the monitor, Jason Voorhees was back up on his feet and moving towards Wing.

Dan Numinen wasn't sure whether he had actually heard his ribs crack or whether the pain had taken over his ears. It sure had taken over his eyes—now he knew what people meant when they described a pain as blinding. He was still mostly blind when Wing rolled off him but he could feel the walkway shaking and he had a pretty good idea why.

He made a tentative start at trying to sit up and his ribs screamed in protest. Shut up, he ordered them silently as he groped around on either side for something to grab hold of. His right hand closed on a rounded metal object that he knew was part of the walkway railing. His ribs screamed again as he dragged himself closer to it and he told them to shut up again.

When his vision cleared, he saw he had a fairly good grip on the rail but he wasn't close enough to grab it with his left hand without rolling onto his side, unless he tried reaching *up* instead of across. The angle at which he was lying...

His ribs screamed some more as he stretched out his left arm. "Shut up!" he bellowed and then froze for a moment, shocked at the sound of his own voice. A moment later, he was even more shocked to realize that his ribs were no longer inclined to scream even just a little bit.

Numinen jumped to his feet and looked down at himself, knowing it didn't matter that he couldn't see anything different about himself. How long did he have, he wondered?

Far below the walkway, he heard the sound of engines beginning to ignite.

Inside Omar Wing, the dark was rising. He could feel it even more vividly than he felt the blows from that creature, or even the impact of his own fists against the thing. And it was pointless. They could have fought each other like this for fifty years to no effect whatsoever. Except *he* wasn't going to last fifty years. He wasn't going to last another fifty seconds and he knew it.

All at once, he became aware of a deep, rumbling sound growing in volume, building into a roar. The walkway began to shudder violently and he realized that with or without Jason Voorhees, the rocket was about to launch.

The realization sent a surge of mindless panic through him like an electric current. Exactly like an electric current; he actually felt it tear through the traitor body, leap out, and cross over into Jason Voorhees.

Abruptly, Wing let go of him and Jason suddenly jerked backwards with such force that his feet came up off the floor of the walkway. He actually flew backwards several feet and then caught himself on the open hatch again. Wing reached towards him, intending to use his last seconds as a human being to shove the monster in.

Just as he reached out, Jason and everything in front of him disappeared in a strange burning cloud of gas.

Black Carol had barely slumped back in her chair when she found herself being yanked roughly out of it. A moment later, she found herself bent over the console while someone cuffed her hands behind her back. A strong hand pulled her upright again by the back of her shirt and turned her around.

She was surprised to see that the control room was full of grunts. Damn, but she must have been in some hyperspace of the mind, she thought. Or maybe she had just gone crazy, in which case, she might

have a defense for her court-martial. Assuming they bothered with a trial before they buried her alive.

Her gaze fell on Sofira, who was also cuffed and in the custody of two very large guys that Carol was pretty sure were assassins and not grunts. So that was how it was, she thought grimly; Sofira caught her eye and gave an almost imperceptible nod. Great.

"Team leader, this is Foreman D," said a man on her left. Carol turned to look. The standard military uniform didn't fool her; she knew for a fact that this guy was an assassin. He was one of the people she had talked to about applying. He flicked a glance in her direction but very pointedly didn't turn to look directly at her. "Control room is secured but the bird has flown. Repeat, subject has been launched and disposed of. However, three other working prototypes have been recovered, one from a disabled elevator and two from the launchpad walkway."

Carol felt her mouth drop open in amazement. "What?" she demanded.

The assassin ignored her. "The prototypes recovered on the launch-pad have sustained damage from the rocket launch. One prototype was in the extremely early stages of transformation but should still be salvageable. The other is fully mature and shows signs of active regeneration in progress."

"Dan Numinen is a grunt, not a prototype," Carol shouted.

Still not looking at her, the assassin made a small motion with one hand and Carol found herself on her way out of the control room between two more assassins.

"Sofira?" she called out as they hustled her down a long hallway.

"Right behind you," came the answer.

"No talking, children," said the guard on her right and tightened his grip very briefly to a point somewhere between painful and excruciating.

So that was it, Carol thought. No briefing, no debriefing, no explanation, no trial, and no chance for appeal. Maybe if she hadn't sent that thing into space, neither she nor Sofira would have been on the wrong side of the handcuffs. Then she caught herself. No, the

only way she could have avoided that was not to have been here in the first place.

The only mistake she had made in launching that creature into space was failing to find a way to send the people behind the super soldier project with him. You weren't home free unless you got rid of all the monsters.

If I can just keep that in mind, she told herself darkly, maybe next lifetime, I'll do it right.

LAST CALL

"For God's sake, Bowes, what the hell have you done now?"

Lynne switched the disposable phone from one ear to the other. "Can't imagine what you mean by that, Waxie," she said, trying to keep her voice light.

"Two days ago, a couple of very serious government goons showed up to inform me that you were missing and presumed dead after the military put down an attempted terrorist takeover of some government research project."

"Did they," she said faintly.

"Did they ever. Only I got the idea they're not really presuming you're dead, since they made it real clear that if by some miracle you appeared alive and well, I was to call them immediately and let them know." Pause. "Furthermore, something tells me they don't count on the honor system so they're probably listening in right now. Which means that I'll be calling them to let them know you called me. I don't think they'd react well if I didn't."

"Glad I've got a disposable phone," Lynne said.

"I wouldn't count on that working for much longer," Waxie warned her.

"You're right. Love ya, Waxie. Bye."

She dropped the phone on the ground and stepped on it, mashing it into the pavement until there was nothing left but fragments, and fragments of fragments. Then she walked over to the car parked at the curb and climbed into the front seat.

"Well?" said Fredo, sitting behind the wheel.

She looked from him to Zelda and Roz in the back. "When did we cross the second border?"

"About two hours ago," Fredo told her.

"I think we ought to cross at least another two before we buy any more disposable phones," she said.

"Or we could just give up disposable phones altogether," Fredo said and put the car in gear.

"I still wish we knew who else got away," Zelda said wistfully.

"Just be glad we know for sure that we got away," Roz told her.
"So far," added Lynne.
Nobody said anything else for a very long time.

EPILOG

The Most Ancient didn't normally bother with flotsam. Any vessel that wandered into range of their considerably sophisticated sensors had been adrift for an extremely long time. If there had been any live cargo to begin with, it would be well beyond the point of compassionate return. The Most Ancient had learned the hard way that as sad as it may be that living creatures had to die, it was usually wiser to let them stay dead. So whenever a spacecraft raised a blip on their awareness, they usually let it pass undisturbed, until it was out of their range again.

But this was different. The cargo inside was not alive but it was no longer dead. That would have been strange enough by itself, but then one of the Most Ancient also determined that, through no fault of its own, it was temporally dislocated.

The entire Most Ancient continuum went immediately to crisis discussion, something that had not occurred for aeons. Temporal dislocation just didn't *happen*. Only in this case, it had. Something had slipped out of order and the wrong course of events had been set in motion. This was further complicated by the fact that the not-alive, not-dead entity had continued not only to exist out of place, but also to act in such a way that it could not be temporally relocated without invoking a disastrous and criminal contradiction.

For a Most Ancient moment, a nano-second by human reckoning, all seemed lost. But then the Most Ancient reviewed the case and understood that the solution was actually quite simple. If they could not temporally relocate the entity and they could not leave it alone, then there was only one course of action left to them: they did both.

They had no idea at the time how unfortunate their decision would be for quite a number of living creatures, nor did any of them ever find out.